
THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

# Concrete Poetry in England and Scotland 1962-75: Ian Hamilton Finlay, Edwin Morgan, Dom Sylvester Houédard and Bob Cobbing

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Abstract

This thesis examines concrete poetry in England and Scotland from 1962 to 1975. Through the 1950s-70s, international concrete poetry evolved away from constructivist influenced, "classical" ideals of minimalism and iconic visual effect towards principles owing more to Dadaism and Futurism: spontaneity, maximalism, sonority and an emphasis on intermedial expression. Against this backdrop, using close textual analysis supported by primary research, I engage with four poets whose work collectively exemplifies the wide range of values which concrete poetry represented in England and Scotland during the period in question. A movement away from classical ideals can be tracked across the oeuvres of Finlay, Morgan, Houédard and Cobbing; but many aspects of their work cannot be accounted for by this general rubric. Finlay saw concrete poetry as a means of casting off Scottish literary tradition, but also of embodying an immutable vision of aesthetic and ethical order, using a marriage of the visual and linguistic to emphasise links between disparate ideas and things. However, his restless reconfiguration of poetry's visual-physical aspects ultimately resulted in a re-separation of word and image which, together with an increasing historical-mindedness, ended his attachment to the style. Morgan, by contrast, used concrete poetry to redefine rather than repel Scottish literary culture, and was a more context-focused poet, using concrete grammar – whose sonic possibilities he exploited more than Finlay – to depict specific communicative scenarios, and thus to register ethical and political imperatives, often reflecting Scottish nationalist ideals. The emphasis on semantics common to Morgan and Finlay's work, reflecting relative fidelity to classical principles, is overridden in Houédard's concrete poetry, which came to employ a grammar of abstract visual motifs in which linguistic meaning was subsumed, related as much to apophatic theology as to classical concrete. For Cobbing too, concrete became a means of evading language, in his case to access a transcendent realm of "intermedial" poetry equally related to language's sonic and visual dimensions, and influenced by various contemporary art-forms, and by counter-cultural ideals. However, Cobbing's emphasis on performing poems, and the reintegration of semantics into his work throughout this period, led by the early 1970s to an alternative poetic ideal of relativity.

Declaration

This is to certify that that the work contained within has been composed by me and is entirely my own work. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification. Various parts of the sixth chapter, and the analysis of Ian Hamilton Finlay's *Canal Stripe Series 3* in chapter three, and some of Gomringer's poems in chapter one, have appeared in similar form in my article "Eyearun: Bob Cobbing and Concrete Poetry", *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* 4.2 (2012): 203-27.

Signed:

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Contents

Notes on Referencing

Given the difficulty of distinguishing the medium of many referenced works, in general, any two-dimensional work referred to by its creator as a "poem" is treated as such in the works cited list, regardless of the materials or method of composition; three-dimensional "poems" are generally treated as works of art. References are not always provided for three-dimensional poems only seen in reproduction, many of which no longer exist in any other form: an in-text reference to the relevant photograph (or similar) is provided instead.

Untitled poems are generally named according to first line, date of composition, an annotative phrase or by a simple descriptive term, as will be clear in context. Untitled letters, introductions, prefaces and forewords by an author referenced more than once are entered in the works cited list according to the relevant descriptive term: "letter", "introduction", "preface" or "foreword". Similarly, untitled interviews are entered as "interview" under the name of the interviewee (all other interviews are also entered under the name of the interviewee). Exhibition catalogues are entered according to publication name, unless an editor or editors are specifically named; other unattributed works are also entered by title.

The page-numbers of works and quotes from bound volumes without marked page-numbers have been calculated by taking the cover as the first page, and appear in square brackets.

In general, the first publication date of a work consulted in republished form is acknowledged by a date after its title in the works cited list; dates given after the titles of unpublished works refer to year of composition rather than publication. In the case of academic articles, and other cases where details of initial publication are seen to be of particular interest, they are provided in full.

As regards in-text citation, I often use simple abbreviations to refer to works with longer titles. It should be self-explanatory to which works these abbreviations refer.

List of Illustrations

Chapter 2. Concrete Foundations



Chapter 3. Order and Doubt: Ian Hamilton Finlay



Chapter 4. Off-Concrete: Edwin Morgan

Chapter 5. Apophasis: Dom Sylvester Houédard



Chapter 6: Abstract Concrete: Bob Cobbing

Introduction

This thesis assesses the scope of concrete poetry in England and Scotland between 1962 and 1975, focusing closely on the work of two Scottish poets and two English poets: Ian Hamilton Finlay, Edwin Morgan, Dom Sylvester Houédard, and Bob Cobbing.[1] No monograph on concrete poetry in England and Scotland, or indeed any area of the British Isles, currently exists, a notable absence considering the nationally or regionally oriented accounts that have emerged elsewhere, including David Seaman's *Concrete Poetry in France*, Liselotte Gumpel's *"Concrete" Poetry from East and West Germany*, and Caroline Bayard's *The New Poetics in Canada and Quebec: From Concretism to Post-Modernism*. Certainly, studies can be cited of individual poets within my project's remit, most obviously Finlay, whose work has been particularly positively received by North American critics such as Marjorie Perloff, most recently in Johnson and Murray's *The Present Order: Writings on the Work of Ian Hamilton Finlay* (2010). But these are not the kind of cross-comparative, context specific works adequate to convey a geographically focused impression of concrete style.

Before expanding on this study's critical context, an introductory definition of concrete poetry should be offered. In fact, several strikingly distinct definitions emerge across the course of the thesis, such that the only universally attributable features are some unusual degree of attention to language's material dimensions – generally visual, but often sonic, and occasionally tactile – and the description of the work in question by its creator as "concrete poetry", reflecting a response, even if loose or subversive, to the original "classical" concrete style discussed in the following chapter.[2] To some extent, I thus define the term concrete poetry according to the extent of its use, which far exceeds that original classical coinage; however, my definition is narrower than some in excluding work described as concrete poetry but produced in ignorance of that coinage.

The paucity of critical engagement with the practice of concrete poetry in England and Scotland is bound up with the style's traditionally negative critical reaction in the British Isles.[3] This negative tradition, encompassing figures as polarised as C.B. Cox and Veronica Forrest-Thomson, is united by the assumptions that concrete poetry abdicates linguistic meaning – that is, semantic meaning, and its auxiliary visual and sonic devices – and that the visual or sonic designs which supersede it are meaningless, beyond a facile emphasis of language's material status. For that one point, it is held,

concrete poetry sacrifices the communicative capacities accrued by language over centuries, for many critics bringing even its status as poetry into doubt.

Some of the earliest and most iconic attacks appeared in Hugh MacDiarmid's articles and letters, the latter documenting his attempts to prevent concrete poetry appearing in *The Oxford Book of Scottish Verse* (1966) and Edinburgh University's annual *Scottish Poetry* series (1966-76): "[t]hese spatial arrangements of isolated letters and geometrically placed phrases, etc. has nothing whatever to do with poetry, any more than mud pies can be called a form of architecture" (Letter to Maurice Lindsay 628). MacDiarmid's opinions were echoed in contemporaneous articles, notably Christopher Wiseman's infamous *Glasgow Review* appraisal (1965):

> 'Concrete poetry' completely rejects the forms and traditions of verse. Its creators do not believe in syntax, logic or metre or developed imagery, and they substitute blocks of letters or words arranged in arbitrary patterns.…it is obvious that we are not dealing with poetry at all.…Experiment has degenerated into literary lunacy. It is also a rejection of any serious attempt to order human experience in artistic terms. (40)

More influential periodicals soon adopted similar lines. Cox's editorial in a 1969 issue of *Critical Quarterly* referenced Bernard Bergonzi's recent publication *Innovations* (1968), which contained an article on concrete by Morgan:

> [C]oncrete poets abandon the usual meanings of language, and play games, making mechanical shapes with words. This too easily becomes a dehumanized art, an escape from life's complexities into a boring world of abstract patterns.…We detest the neo-modernists' lack of moral purpose, their contempt for traditional wisdom and civilised order. (291-92)

Jonathan Raban's *The Society of the Poem* (1971) attributes to concrete a comparable linguistic impoverishment, and vacuous preoccupation with visuals. But whereas Cox sees this as nihilistic, Raban finds in it a "puritanical air of righteous minimalism": "as if these prettily arranged slogans, slender jokes, and elegant examples of the craft of the typographer were the very last unpolluted goods that could be salvaged from the ruins of a corrupted language" (109).

If some such arguments betray views of the relationship between language and reality as essentially static, perhaps contestable by asserting poetry's capacity to

transform rather than abandon that relationship through linguistic innovation, many critics committed to just such principles criticise concrete poetry for failing to do so. In *Poetic Artifice* (1978), for example, Veronica Forrest-Thomson distinguished the "suspended naturalisation" of good experimental poetry – whereby precisely overlaid patterns of semantic imagery and phonic effect prevent assimilation of the poem according to existing notions of linguistic value, setting up new ones alongside them – with concrete poetry's "irrational obscurity".[4] In irrationally obscure work, the poet tries to prevent that assimilation simply by stripping the poem of meaning, in the case of concrete poetry by reducing language to a material substance: "these 'poets' have found it necessary to establish a more radical and spurious continuity with the physical world normally mediated through language. They treat words as physical objects; they try to avoid mediation altogether" (44-45). Ironically, this lack of meaning forces the reader back onto those existing relationships to grant the poem any value: "[o]nce all pretence to meaning is abandoned, the artifacts themselves are not obscure—though why someone should have bothered to produce them may be obscure" (47).

In comparable spirit, Andrew Duncan, in *The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry* (2003), disparages concrete poets for having "jettisoned the lexicon, the organised past experience of the nation. This crossword-puzzle like activity seemed for its acolytes like a new form of art: an early example of the vacuity and megalomania which were going to be very fashionable in the 1960s" (53). Duncan similarly takes issue with concrete poets not for disrupting existing relationships between language and reality, but for sacrificing potential ones, by abandoning words, revealing the importance of those accrued communicative capacities to adherents of both innovation and tradition in verse.

These critics' views are raised not primarily to be opposed – although they are implicitly challenged simply by paying close attention to the work in question – but to help explain the lack of a study such as this one.[5] However, concrete poetry in the British Isles has of course also been the subject of sympathetic criticism, both dedicated and broadly focused. But while laudable, this coverage tends to be partial and selective, defined by attention to an exemplary poet or group.

In broader studies, attention generally swings between Scotland, especially Morgan and Finlay, and the London-based group oriented around Cobbing's Writers Forum; the West Country milieu represented by Houédard is persistently overlooked.

This pattern is evident in both criticism and anthologies. In the former case, Nicholas Zurbrugg's "Ian Hamilton Finlay and Concrete Poetry", from *Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism* (1996), presents Finlay's work as the sole exemplar of the form under consideration. By contrast, Julian Cowley's "Performing the Wor(l)d: Contemporary British Concrete Poetry", from *In Black and Gold: Contiguous Traditions in Post-War British and Irish Poetry* (1994), exclusively concerns Writers Forum poets. Robert Sheppard's chapters on Cobbing and Maggie O'Sullivan in *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents, 1950-2000* (2005) perform a similar function, as did Eric Mottram's influential 1974 lecture on the "The British Poetry Revival", revised and printed in *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible* (1993): by drawing concrete under the banner of that "revival", largely defined by its challenge to the stylistic orthodoxies of the Movement, Mottram emphasises concrete poetry's capacity to challenge expressive conventions, foregrounding a version of the style largely associable with Cobbing and his ilk.

As regards anthologies, Edward Lucie-Smith, in his *British Poetry Since 1945* (1970), conspicuously placed concrete poems by Morgan and Finlay in his "Scotland" section, describing the "Scottish Concrete poets" as "part of a movement which stretched half-way across the world before literary London ever heard of it" (Introduction 31). Similarly, the concrete contribution of John Matthias's influential *23 Modern British Poets* (1971) comprises an extensive selection of Finlay's work. In *The New British Poetry, 1968-1988* (1988), co-edited by Mottram, Gillian Allnutt, Fred D'Aguiar and Ken Edwards, focus shifts to London: the section compiled by Mottram concerns "poets who began writing in the British Poetry Revival", the concrete contribution seven poems or poem-excerpts by Cobbing (Mottram "A Treacherous Assault on British Poetry" 131). Richard Caddel and Peter Quartermain subsequently selected Cobbing and Peter Finch's concrete poetry as exemplars of the style in *Other: British and Irish Poetry Since 1970* (1999). With Robert Crawford and Simon Armitage's *Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland Since 1945* (1998), attention swings back to Morgan and Finlay; although it is finally balanced, if engulfed, in Keith Tuma's huge *Anthology of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry* (2001), which places Finlay's "Sea Poppies" near three of Cobbing's poems.

A more complex set of proclivities emerges from more closely focused studies, either produced within or focused upon a British-Irish context. If anthologies, dedicated

journal issues, and assessments of concrete poetry in broader studies are considered in this category, it is quite extensive. But it tends to be defined by several recurring preoccupations. These can again indicate attention to an exemplary poet or poets, as well as the critic's enabling cultural-geographic context and, in some cases, a narrowed focus arising from composition contemporaneous to the object of study. To proceed via inevitable simplification, we can posit four common angles of study: two defined by polarised appraisals of concrete aesthetics, two by different senses of concrete poetry's particular significance to Scottish culture.[6]

The first is defined by attention to classical concrete style: minimal composition; use of visual presentation to clarify language; a subdued sonic element. It explores the adaptation of these principles by English and Scottish poets, often taking Finlay as exemplary. Because this approach tends to implicitly connote scepticism of work defined by a maximalist or intermedial aesthetic, the rise of such work by the late 1960s is often seen as the end of concrete poetry; the style's silent minimalism is also often envisaged as a panacea to the freewheeling UK beat scene documented in Michael Horovitz's *Children of Albion* (1969).[7]

The particular interest taken in Finlay's work perhaps reflects the fact that, in cultural-geographic terms, this approach is partly associable with two groups to whom he introduced concrete: most significantly, because more prolific, a group of young critics based in Cambridge, including Stephen Bann and Mike Weaver, who met Finlay in Edinburgh in summer 1964; and also the poets associated with the Nottingham-based press and journal Tarasque, Stuart Mills and Simon Cutts.[8] In the first case, engagement with concrete was inflected by the group's other academic interests, including the objectivist and Black Mountain poets Weaver was then studying, constructivist art and architecture, and French structuralism. Bann attributes the second influence to their collaborator Philip Steadman's connection to Cambridge's architecture faculty, then populated by figures connected with "the whole Bauhaus ideology", including J.L. Martin, co-editor of the 1937 constructivist anthology *Circle* (personal interview, January 10, 2011). The third was largely his own prerogative, reflected in his translation of Barthes's "The Activity of Structuralism" for their magazine *Form* (1966).

Exemplary studies first appeared in *Image*, a magazine Steadman edited for three issues from autumn 1964 until winter 1965, the first featuring Bann's "Communication and Structure in Concrete Poetry" and Weaver's "Concrete and Kinetic: the Poem as

Functional Object", alongside concrete poems by Finlay, Pierre Garnier, Gomringer and the Noigandres poets. *Form* (1966-69), co-founded and edited by Bann, Weaver and Steadman, published relevant articles including Cutts's "The Aesthetic of Ian Hamilton Finlay" (1969) and Eugen Gomringer's "The First Years of Concrete Poetry" (1967).[9] Weaver's 1966 article "Concrete Poetry" to some extent encapsulates the position, stressing concrete poetry's precise emphasis and use of basic expressive categories through visual-linguistic effect, and flight from self-expression, while acknowledging the incorporation of "expressionisms" into this compositional framework, notably by Finlay. Similar principles are evident in Bann's editorship of *Concrete Poetry: An International Anthology* (1967), one of the three major concrete anthologies to appear in the late 1960s – along with Emmett Williams's *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (1967), and Mary Ellen Solt's *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (1968) – following the smaller collection he had edited for the *Beloit Poetry Journal* (*Concrete Poetry*; 1966). The anthology's English language section includes four English and Scottish poets – Finlay, Morgan, Houédard and John Furnival – whose works were selected broadly according to the above principles, although Bann's introduction acknowledges a slimmer "degree of coherence" amongst English speaking poets than amongst classical concretists (7). His foreword to a selection of poems in a 1969 *London Magazine* ("Concrete Poetry and After") implies the lapse of these principles by the late 1960s, noting that carrying the impetus of concrete poetry forward now involved re-emphasising language and image's distinct roles, rather than attempting to splice them.[10] Few studies in this vein appeared after the 1960s, but its cogency and influence remain, and later writing on Finlay tends to reaffirm it.

By contrast, many critical accounts of concrete poetry have emphasised precisely that capacity to occupy the interstices between mediums, endorsing chance and spontaneity as the aesthetic qualities able to access those spaces, and thus an equally contrasting maximalism of expression. This can indicate counter-cultural ideals, taking stress on expressive conventions as stress on socio-cultural conventions; that stress might also be defined in opposition to poetic conventions, including those of classical concrete style. Such arguments often broaden the definition of concrete poetry – by tracing it back prior to the origins of classical style, or forwards beyond its posited late-1960s demise; or by allying concrete and sound poetry – partly to challenge the classical model's perceived grip on the term. Cobbing, and less frequently Houédard, are often invoked as exemplars.

Indeed, this angle of analysis was partly forged by Cobbing's own statements on concrete poetry from the mid-1960s onwards, and can be traced in studies by poet-critics associated with his Writers Forum press and reading group. These authors tend to reject classical definitions of concrete style and origins, some jettisoning the term "concrete poetry" itself because of the problems of definition thus introduced, finding more individual critical rubrics to assess the work in question. This position can also be associated with Houédard, and a looser affiliated group of poet-critics located around Gloucestershire in the 1960s-70s, including John Sharkey.

Cobbing's statements on concrete poetry appeared in various little magazines, many subsequently reprinted in his and Peter Mayer's 1978 text *Concerning Concrete Poetry.* Cobbing's 1968 *International Times* article "From Haiku to Happening" encapsulates most of the above positions – also positing a stylistic link between concrete and contemporaneous intermedia art – polemically offsetting them against the classical definition associated with Bann:

> CONCRETE POETRY which began as small Haiku-like constellations of words on a page has EXPLODED to become a 7 ft high maze of multi-worded screens with cowbell entrance and automatic central speaking-shrine the first epic concrete poem – or complexx of sound tapes in an environment of films and slides total sound/visual experience – or improvisations human & percussive with mime & live-action to a vibrating drone on tape 'a revolution for the body-spirit & intellect & ear' BUT there R those who would artificially restrict this growth & confine concrete poetry once more Chieff Offender in this country is the appropriately named Stephen BANN Have none of his London Mag edition anthology. (17)

Cobbing and Mayer's anthology builds on this argument, printing timelines based on studies by Houédard which push the origins of concrete back through Dadaism and Futurism to the Phaistos Disc and "trad folksong refrains" (63, 71). It also rejects concrete's reported death, positing "more concrete poetry than ever before", much of it "concerned with forms other than those of the printed page" (51). Cobbing produced many further critical studies and anthologies, including *Changing Forms in English Visual Poetry* (1988), *Verbi Visi Voco* (1992) with Bill Griffiths, and, with Lawrence Upton, *Word Score Utterance Choreography* (1998). Studies shaped partly by contact with Writers Forum include Mottram's assessments of Cobbing's work in "A Prosthetics of Poetry: The Art of Bob Cobbing" (1973), and of concrete generally in *Towards Design in Poetry* (1977); also

Mayer's anthologies *Bob Cobbing and Writers Forum* (1974) and *Alphabetical and Letter Poems: A Crestomathy* (1978), and more recent studies of Cobbing's work by poet-critics such as Lawrence Upton, cris cheek and Robert Sheppard.

Comparable works to emerge from the Gloucestershire scene include Houédard's many 1960s-70s articles and statements, and John Sharkey's UK concrete anthology *Mindplay* (1971), plans for which began nearby in Bristol in the early 1960s (Sharkey, personal interview). This anthology endorses a multimedia, maximalist aesthetic partly reflecting alienation from the conception of UK concrete oriented around classical style: a feeling of being "pushed out … if you didn't pay homage to the Brazilians and Gomringer, or Finlay" (ibid.); notably, Finlay refused to contribute. The comparable aesthetics of concrete poets based in London and the West Country was acknowledged in their collective presentation in Cobbing's 1974 anthology *Gloup and Woup*, its title meaning "Gloucestershire Group and Westminster Group".

Clearly, the two foregoing perspectives are antithetical in fundamental respects. However, they are similar in as much as they tend not to denote a particular concern with the special importance concrete poetry has always assumed in Scottish literature and culture, recognition of which has nonetheless been one of the mainstays of its critical reception in the British Isles. Within this field of enquiry, we should distinguish between one angle of analysis focused on internally plotted histories of Scottish literature, particularly upon concrete poets' defiance of the so-called Scottish Renaissance of the 1920s-60s, and another focused on concrete poetry as a means of national or regional self-definition against broadly "English" alternatives. Because the maximalist, multimedia poesis alluded to above is largely associable with English poets, critics endorsing these angles of enquiry also tend to eschew it; the two exemplary poets are generally Morgan and Finlay.

The first of these positions involves citing the flytings of Morgan, Finlay and other young Scottish poets with MacDiarmid and his acolytes in the late 1950s and early 1960s, over the latter's argued detachment from contemporary Scottish literature and culture; and MacDiarmid and others' subsequent denunciations of concrete style in various articles and letters. In this capacity, notwithstanding concrete's "classical" affiliations, its lightness of theme and expression – its "pop" credentials – are often emphasised, along with its international credentials: essentially those aspects seen as

most antithetical to the Renaissance poets' aims to reconstruct an independent national tongue and culture.

By January 1966, this context was coherent enough for Edward Lucie-Smith to speculate that concrete might have "implanted itself so firmly in Scotland, and, till now, so comparatively feebly in England" because it represented "a way of throwing off the shackles of an oppressive Scottish Nationalism" ("Concrete Poetry" 44). The argument mainly resurfaces in studies produced in a Scottish context, and particularly in Scottish magazines and anthologies of the 1960s-70s. Duncan Glen's *Akros* journal and press were especially significant in presenting renaissance and concrete poetics as stylistic counterpoints, perhaps because Glen was interested in both: his press favoured writing in Scots, devoting much attention to MacDiarmid, but Glen was also a typographer, who published Morgan's concrete collections *Gnomes* (1968) and *The Horseman's Word* (1970), and edited a *Visual Issue* of *Akros* (1972). The resulting editorial policy is exemplified by articles such as Stephen Scobie's "The Side-Road to Dunsyre" (1970), a cross-comparison of Finlay and MacDiarmid's aesthetics. Glen's introduction to *The Akros Anthology of Scottish Poetry 1965-1970*, meanwhile, presents concrete and other recent developments in Scottish verse as primarily significant for not being written in Scots.

This argument has recently been re-established in biographical studies of Morgan and Finlay: James McGonigal's *Beyond the Last Dragon: A Life of Edwin Morgan* (2010), and Alec Finlay's introduction to *Ian Hamilton Finlay: Selections* (2012), which evokes his father's early-1960s poetry in the context of a "homely" "Scottish avant-garde" completed by Morgan and Hamish Henderson, pressing "a fey shoulder … against the wheel of the moribund Scottish Renaissance" ("Introduction: Picking the Last Wild Flower" 20). Eleanor Bell's "Experimenting with the Verbivocovisual: Edwin Morgan's Early Concrete Poetry" (2012) similarly refers to Morgan's sense of concrete' poetry's "ability to deflect the ripples of literary nationalism" (109), while her previous article "'The Ugly Burds Without Wings'? Reactions to Tradition Since the 1960s" (2011) applies a similar reading to Morgan and Finlay's early-1960s work, by cross-comparison with Irish poetry.

By another understanding, concrete poetry reflects literary and cultural sensibilities offset against alternatives associable in some way with England: often the asserted stylistic conservatism of the Movement poets, or broader aesthetic values seen

to be propagated by privileged echelons of UK society largely based south of the border. This argument often involves comparing concrete's unconventional syntax and orthography to regional, nonstandard, even "post-colonial" expression, and the contention that concrete poetry was not composed, or not composed well, in England.

Again, this position can be associated largely with studies produced in a Scottish context; it arguably has its roots in Morgan's own writing about the genre. Certainly, his 1965 *Peace News* article "Concrete Poetry" pitches it against a complacent and small-sighted English poetic scene implicitly equated with Larkin et al.:

> The English Channel is a pretty narrow strip of water, but it's remarkable what an effective barrier it has been to the passage of ideas.…[Q]uietness and absence of ideas and discussion may indicate lazy minds and smallness of spirit. Too many English poets since World War Two have been busy stacking their neat little bundles of firewood, and have stopped planting trees. (6)

The tone is complicated by Morgan's description of concrete poetry as a "tentative widening of the English poet's field of operations": he may be uncharacteristically self-identifying as English. But a later article, "Scottish Fiction" (2002), more forthrightly describes concrete as "an international movement that turned out to be strong in Scotland but not in England. When Ian Hamilton Finlay and I began to publish our concrete poetry, eyebrows were raised; could this be poetry? Could this be Scottish? I was ready to answer Yes to both charges" (18).[11] The idea that concrete indicated literary and cultural self-definition against dominant English equivalents seems implicit here.

Various subsequent studies have occupied similar lines, many substituting the term "regional" for "Scottish". In *The Individual and the Twentieth-Century Scottish Literary Tradition* (1971), Glen utilised a commonly drawn connection between concrete grammar and the communicative structures of the dawning "Electric Age" as posited by Marshall McLuhan, to associate it with the "regional languages" whose resurgence would be enabled, according to McLuhan, by that epoch's diversification of communication structures (22):

> We are moving out of a mechanical, lineal, print-dominated culture into the new, fluxing and mosaic-forming Electric Age as described by McLuhan. And, although his Scottish admirers have been very quiet about it … this new age,

> with the media of radio and television, is not the end of regional languages but their saviour.…We want … a literacy reflecting the full field of modern consciousness, including that explored by the concrete poets. For the Scot--or the Liverpool poet--this cannot, as yet, it seems be achieved through the rhythms and idioms of Oxbridge English. (22-23)

Tom Leonard's "The Locust Tree in Flower, and Why it had Difficulty Flowering in Britain" (1977) presents concrete's nonstandard syntax, explored "most consistently" in Britain by Finlay, as a challenge to the association of intellectual merit with orthography reflecting "Received Pronunciation" (97).[12] Its value is thus implicitly equated with that of poetry preserving regional dialects, including Scottish ones; indeed, Leonard's own Glaswegian orthography developed alongside his early use of concrete forms, notably in *Poems* (1973). Leonard carefully distinguishes RP from "English", noting that the former can be "bought all over Britain", although the two arguably remain intuitively associable (98). He also describes its equation with intellect as an ideological tool of the privately educated rather than "the English", although the perpetuation of those interests could similarly be associated with an Anglo-centric system of government.

More recently, Michael Gardiner's *From Trocchi to Trainspotting: Scottish Critical Theory Since 1960* (2006) has taken concrete's visual forms to embody a "post-colonial" sensibility peculiarly apt to Scotland. Because "power over visual space is a basis of empire", "any poem in which the visual is awarded *too much* importance relative to mainstream narrative poetry, and in which prosodic 'reading' and image-formation ironise one another, can be regarded as critically postcolonial" (112). Gardiner thus asserts the inimicality of concrete to mainstream English poetry and culture, claiming (incorrectly) that it "bypassed England to arrive in Scotland – though there were many underground English versions in the 1970s": "[t]he state-society of Eng. Lit. is perpetually *sous erasure* in concrete's negative prosody, helping to explain why 1960s/1970s English publishers … were content to settle for Philip Larkin" (113). To different ends, Marjorie Perloff's *Unoriginal Genius* (2010) implicitly associates concrete poetry with Scotland over England by asserting the peculiar receptiveness to concrete style of the "smaller or marginalized nations of the postwar": Sweden, Switzerland, Scotland, Austria and "especially Brazil" (12). This receptiveness is associated both with an appetite for early-twentieth-century avant-garde idioms in countries where they had

not initially taken hold, and a capacity for cultural renewal absent in the beleaguered "war capitals" (61).

Many studies, though still framed by these arguments, reflect a less tendentious sense of concrete poetry's significance to Scotland. The Scottish poetry magazine *Lines*, edited by the concrete poet Alan Riddell in the mid-1960s, supported the form through articles such as Mark Boyle's "Concrete Pointers" (1965), reviews by Riddell, Robert Tait and others, and a 1967 "concrete number" featuring Finlay, Morgan, Riddell and Thomas A. Clark. Tait, Morgan and Robert Garioch's *Scottish International* pursued a similar editorial policy in the late 1960s-early 1970s; jumping forwards, the 1992 issue of W.N. Herbert and Richard Price's *Gairfish* concerning Scotland's avant-garde heritage is permeated by references to its concrete era, while Ken Cockburn and Alec Finlay's *The Order of Things: An Anthology of Scottish Sound, Pattern and Concrete Poetry* (2001) aligns concrete poems thematically with sound poems and historical pattern poems – notably by James VI – to trace what their introduction calls "alternative routes through the landscape of Scottish poetry as a whole" ("Words and Things" 13).

I should emphasise that the orientation of this study in relation to these four broadly posited angles of study is constructive and supplementary. Rather than endorsing one and rejecting the others, this thesis is structured to allow a sense of the interplay between the values correctly inferred by all four to emerge, by detailed assessment of four poets from very different social and stylistic contexts, whose work cumulatively embodies all the principles just invoked. This said, I do bring to light various critical oversights attendant to some or all of them, most notably by following Richard Price's refutation, in "Magazines and Newspapers as Literary Infrastructure in the 1960s", of the idea that concrete poetry somehow "bypassed England". Price makes this point with regards to literary cultural infrastructure – journals, festivals – but it serves equally well in relation to the creation of poetry itself. By bringing Houédard's work to attention, I also cast light on concrete poetry's overlooked West Country milieu, inviting re-evaluation of such equally neglected figures as John Furnival and Kenelm Cox. In a wider sense, I contribute to scholarship on both concrete poetry and twentieth-century British-Irish poetry by offering a thorough account of the English and Scottish variants of an important yet understudied modern poetic style.

One upshot of this might be to counterbalance that hostile tradition initially identified: one thing which this study makes abundantly clear is that the concrete poem

need not abandon language, nor take on meaningless material dimensions. Admittedly, in the latter case, the forms of meaning which a concrete poem assumes at the sonic or visual level might be seen to lie outside the realm of the "poetic". However, where this seems to be the case, I have chosen to interpret the poem at that "non-poetic" level in order to develop the most meaningful possible relationship with it, rather than cutting off engagement for the sake of generic boundaries. This technique is indebted to the perceptive responses to concrete poetry, unconcerned with its strictly "poetic" pedigree, which have traditionally emerged from typographic research.[13]

In methodological terms, this project works through close textual analysis, although artistic, cultural and social contexts are addressed throughout. Paying close attention to particular poets counters the tendency towards generalisation resulting in unilateral accounts of concrete style, but also means that as an overview, this thesis functions by detailed example rather than exhaustive documentation. Focusing closely on four figures, I overlook or pay only scant attention to many important poets, including Stephen Bann, Thomas A. Clark, Kenelm Cox, Simon Cutts, Peter Finch, John Furnival, Tom Leonard, Stuart Mills, Alan Riddell and many others. My approach also precludes analysis of concrete poetry by reference to the aesthetics and sociology of little magazine and presses. There are thus no direct accounts of the important presses which three of the poets under consideration founded – Cobbing's Writers Forum, Finlay's Wild Hawthorn Press, and Houédard's Openings, set up with John Furnival – or of magazines such as Finlay's *Poor.Old.Tired.Horse*, Cobbing's *And*, and Cobbing and Houédard's *Kroklok*.[14]

The following chapter assesses the nature of, and influences upon, classical concrete style, and other precedents and influences related to concrete poetry as a whole, in order to frame its adaptation in England and Scotland. The remainder of the thesis comprises four chronological studies, tracking the development of each poet's concrete style following their discovery of it as a pre-existing entity originating in Germany and Brazil, until either they felt the term no longer fitted their work or it self-evidently ceased to.[15] These studies make extensive use of unpublished or rare material, as well as primary research, including interviews with poets and publishers, and studies of authorial correspondences at libraries throughout the UK and USA, to provide an unprecedentedly detailed picture of each poet's oeuvre. I have made particular use of Finlay's correspondences at the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh, Morgan's

letters at Glasgow University Library and his Scottish Poetry Library collection of books and ephemera, Cobbing's British Library papers, and Houédard's archive at the John Rylands Library, Manchester.

My third chapter assesses the relatively brief period in the 1960s when Finlay referred to himself as a concrete poet, which involved the use of concrete poetry's formal duality – largely involving language and vision, rather than sound – to neatly render or enhance a thematic duality. This aesthetic is indebted to a particular understanding of classical concrete poetry defined in opposition to prevailing trends in Scottish literary culture, yet rooted in stylistic and ethical preoccupations subsistent throughout his career. Finlay's concrete period was governed by restless material reconfiguration of this immutable underlying principle, eventually entailing a turn to landscape gardening and architecture, and a re-separation of the roles of language and material form, which both extended and overran concrete style as he understood it.

Turning in the next chapter to Morgan's concrete poetry, mainly practised during the 1960s-70s, we find a far more context specific use of concrete forms, to render the grammatical qualities of particular communicative scenarios, ranging from outer space and the animal kingdom to specifically Scottish sound worlds. Again this reflects an enthusiastic response to classical principles, seized partly in opposition to dominant precepts of contemporaneous Scottish literature – in Morgan's case to redefine rather than avert such precepts – and also to strains of twentieth-century English and Anglo-American poetry. But it also reflects a greater desire to subvert and transform concrete grammar to turn it to those contextual purposes, through more ostentatious incorporations of theme, narrative and authorial perspective.

Both Morgan and Finlay, however, essentially saw concrete poetry as a means of enhancing or constructively altering semantics. For Houédard, the subject of my fifth chapter, it ultimately came to entail a grammar of abstract, allusive visual forms – phantasmagoric in appearance but meticulously constructed – in which semantic meaning was subsumed. These "typestracts" were the consummate expression of a poetics of negation or apophasis expressed throughout his career which, although Houédard worked in response to classical style, must also be viewed in relation to the apophatic principles connected to his vocation as a Benedictine monk and theologian. Moreover, it arguably found greater resonances with contemporaneous artistic and

poetic styles concerned with effacing "positive" expression, notably auto-destruction, than with classical concrete poetry.

For Cobbing too, concrete poetry was often defined in opposition to semantics, in his case reflecting a suspicion of socially conventional communication associable with 1960s counter-cultural politics. But as my final chapter shows, whereas Houédard's withdrawal from language entailed a renunciation of expression, for Cobbing – until the early 1970s – that withdrawal granted access to a rarified sphere of intermedial poesis, in which absolute objectivity of expression could be achieved. This style was forged in response to an eclectic range of twentieth-century artistic and poetic forms, within which classical principles served largely as a stylistic counterpoint, ultimately resulting in a paradigm of "performance" wherein non-linguistic visual poems formed the basis for multiple sonic – and visual – variations. Along with the periodic reintegration of semantics throughout this period, and especially towards its close, this resulted in an eventual turn from objectivity to relativity as a poetic ideal.

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[1] The dates bracketing this project's time-frame are the year when poets in the British Isles began composing concrete poetry in the sense defined below, and the year when Houédard published *Begin Again*, the last collection or artwork, chronologically speaking, subject to detailed assessment.

[2] Concrete poetry in which language's sonic or implied sonic elements are emphasised is often referred to as "sound poetry". But where it was produced by self-described concrete poets, it merits that title. Such work should be distinguished from the independent sound poetry movement originating in France in the 1950s, although this poetry often came to influence concrete poetry and vice versa, or became described as concrete poetry itself, making that boundary a permeable one.

[3] Interestingly, this hostility can be placed in a historical continuum. Referring to pre-twentieth-century visual poetry in *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature* (1987), Dick Higgins cites "violent attacks upon it in each age in which it occurred", from, amongst others, Samuel Butler, Edward Benlowes, Thomas Hobbes, John Dryden, Richard Owen Cambridge, and Joseph Addison (13-14).

[4] Forrest-Thomson actually experimented with concrete herself early in her career – some concrete poems feature in her *Collected Poems and Translations* (238-41) – after encountering Morgan's work, possibly at a 1964 lecture. Morgan's review "*Collected Poems and Translations* by Veronica Forrest-Thomson" (1991) refers to such an encounter, although James McGonigal, Morgan's biographer, states that contact probably came "through her hearing one of EM's radio broadcasts on concrete poetry on the Third Programme" (*Beyond the Last Dragon* 165).

[5] Interestingly, many critics who hold such views admit originality as an exceptional possibility within concrete style, generally after simply paying such attention to a particular poem or poet. R.P. Draper's *An Introduction to Twentieth-Century Poetry in English* (1999) describes Morgan's "Orgy" as "a triumph over the perceived limitations of concrete poetry", "creating, simultaneously, the spatial effect of a modernist abstract

painting and the sequential effect of poetry and drama" (224). Duncan praises Finlay's rendering of the visual dimension a "new symbolic space" (62). Raban includes an enthusiastic description of a Cobbing sound performance (88-89). But these examples are generally presented as "the exception which proves the rule", in Draper's words (224). Draper's account follows a 1971 essay, "Concrete Poetry", which tentatively credits the style with "scope for rational development as well as reasonable pleasure" (340).

[6] Although a posited category identifies an angle of enquiry roughly associable with certain groups and contexts, it is not assumed to represent the full range of ideas attendant to each study within it, or to preclude the possibility that a study placed within it might also adhere to theories associated with others; nor are those studies assumed to possess all the characteristics attributed to the category, only enough to justify inclusion.

[7] Stephen Bann notes this relationship to beat poetry in a 2010 interview with Schaffner.

[8] In his *Domestic Pensées* dust-jacket notes, Mills recalls first meeting Finlay in Fettes Row, Edinburgh, an address Finlay left in spring 1965. It should be emphasised that the following and preceding descriptions solely concern these critics' views on concrete poetry during the 1960s, not their work's broader or subsequent scope.

[9] See Steadman's interview about *Form* in *Clip Stamp Fold: The Radical Architecture of Little Magazines 196X to 197X* (2010). My forthcoming article "Concrete Poetry in the UK" assesses Bann's own concrete poetry.

[10] Other critical responses to this aesthetic shift include Morgan's "Into the Constellation" (1972) and Zurbrugg's "The Great Advance Backwards" (1972).

[11] This article is sourced from Bell's "Experimenting with the Verbivocovisual".

[12] Leonard asserts that MacDiarmid and Cobbing present similar challenges regarding "lexis" and "phonology"; the essay chiefly concerns William Carlos Williams (ibid.).

[13] See, for example, John Lewis's *Typography: Basic Principles* (1963), and Aaron Marcus's "Introduction to the Visual Syntax of Concrete Poetry" (1974).

[14] Many of these projects are discussed in two excellent books on little magazine culture, David Miller and Richard Price's *British Poetry Magazines, 1914-2000* (2006), and Wolfgang Görtschacher's *Little Magazine Profiles* (1993).

[15] Cobbing's huge output of concrete poetry prevents chronological coverage. I thus assess the work he produced over a shorter period during which its fundamental style was established.

Concrete Foundations

On May 25, 1962, a letter from the Portuguese concrete poet E.M. de Melo e Castro appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* (*TLS*), in response to John Willett's article "Poetry, Prose and the Machine":

> Sir,—I have read with great interest the article "Poetry, Prose and the Machine" by a Special Correspondent in your issue of May 4, but I cannot help feeling surprised at his not mentioning the increasingly important movement of *poesia concreta*, which originated in Brazil and is now reaching Portugal. In fact *poesia concreta* is a successful experiment in ideogrammatic or diagrammatic writing and poetic creation precisely on the lines to which your Correspondent refers.
>
> This kind of experiment is slowly replacing the traditional descriptive method of communication by a visual, compact, ideogrammatic way of bringing about and conveying complex and subtle relations among ideas, images, words, things, &c. *Poesia concreta* is arousing a wave of interest both in Brazil and in Portugal, especially among young people and the most advanced poets.

In his 1964 *TLS* article "Paradada", Houédard commented: "edwin morgan / ian h finlay / anselm hollo / myself all came to concrete directions out of different places thru TLS letter 250562". Indeed, the practice of concrete poetry in England and Scotland largely stems from several independent encounters with this letter. Morgan, for example, wrote to Melo e Castro, who sent him an anthology containing Brazilian concrete poetry; Morgan also introduced this work to Finlay, who subsequently printed concrete poetry in the British Isles for the first time in *Poor.Old.Tired.Horse* (*POTH*) early in 1963. Houédard, after reading the note, galvanised a group of poets and artists based near his cell at Prinknash Abbey in Gloucestershire, including John Furnival, John Sharkey, Thomas A. Clark, Kenelm Cox and Charles Verey, into a period of activity loosely bound by shared "concrete" principles. Many subsequent introductions to the style – including Cobbing's – came from poets alerted by Melo e Castro's note.

At one level, therefore, English-Scottish concrete poetry can be traced back with an almost disarming degree of clarity to the little missive printed above, a common practical origin which might be taken to denote some semblance of group-mindedness. If any such sensibility can be inferred, the sixth issue of the Cheltenham art college magazine *Link* (June-July 1964), edited by David Holmes, serves as well as anything as an indicator. This issue featured poems and critical statements by Finlay, Houédard,

Sharkey, Anselm Hollo and John Furnival, alongside Houédard's translation of Pierre Garnier's "Position 1 of International for Spatialist Poetries" (October 1963), a manifesto collating recent international developments in concrete poetics, signed by Finlay, Furnival, Morgan, Houédard, Hollo and Herbert Read.[1] This collective endorsement meant that the appearance of Garnier's manifesto, in particular, gave at least some impression of common ground, as did other collective projects such as the Cambridge-based International Kinetic Poetry Fund, set up by Weaver and others in 1964, and the many concrete exhibitions and magazines which appeared from the early 1960s onwards, early and iconic examples of the former including the First International Exhibition of Concrete, Phonetic and Kinetic Poetry (November 1964), curated by Bann, Weaver and others, and Jasia Reichardt's Between Poetry and Painting (October-November 1965).

In general however, it seems more pertinent to note the almost total lack of binding stylistic, political or ethical principles attendant to concrete poetry's English-Scottish reception, exemplified by the divergences between the four bodies of work I assess. To help explain these divergences, we must turn to the broader international development of concrete poetry from the 1950s-70s, which ultimately became defined by a comparable disunity, related to that of the English-Scottish scene due to both networks of mutual influence, and responses to similar precedents and pressures. This chapter outlines that international context, defining both the distinct "classical" concrete style to which all subsequent developments relate back – the only universal influence upon English and Scottish concrete poets – and the various processes by which that style was subverted and transfigured over the period in question.[2]

I initially recount the conception of classical style by the Brazilian Noigandres group and the Swiss poet Eugen Gomringer after a 1955 meeting, following isolated explorations beginning in the early 1950s. Assessing this collective consolidation by reference to those poets' comparable socio-cultural backgrounds, I argue that it heralded the formation of a loosely knit international group of poets referred to as the "concrete movement", membership of which denoted knowledge of and sympathy towards classical style, rather than strict adherence to it. I then stake out the style's parameters, assessing some exemplary classical poems in relation to artistic influences – constructivism and concrete art in Gomringer's case, various literary precedents in the Noigandres' case – and exploring two emblematic critical accounts of its value: Mike

Weaver's formalist analysis, and approaches incorporating C.S. Peirce's semiotic theory. In light of theoretical problems inferable from the second, I assess the demise of both the concrete movement and classical style by around 1968. I then consider concrete poetry's gradual development from the late 1950s onwards, amongst poets both within and outside that movement, into a style defined to different degrees by various principles antithetical to the classical style: maximalism, spontaneity, and an emphasis on intermediality and sound. Citing the independent emergence of these principles in various countries by around 1970, I assign them a generally unattributed degree of stylistic coherence, related to a common set of early-twentieth-century influences previously manifested in the early-1950s "concrete poetry" of Öyvind Fahlström, which is thus assessed as a precedent and exemplar.

Clearly, this account of international concrete poetry does not entail dogmatic adherence to classical principles; but even rooting concrete poetry in classical style this loosely has often proved contentious. Many critics have pushed its origins back further, to early-twentieth-century precedents and beyond, or outwards, to encompass contemporaneous artistic practices such as cut-up and sound poetry, pop, conceptual and book art, fluxus and "happenings". Indeed, two of the poets this project focuses on produced critical accounts re-defining concrete in broader historical terms: Houédard's "Between Poetry and Painting: Chronology" (1965) and Cobbing's *Concerning Concrete Poetry* (1978), co-authored with Mayer.

To justify the limits I place on the term, a distinction must thus be drawn between bringing the work assessed in such studies within the definition of concrete poetry itself, and acknowledging its influence upon it. In the first case, my decision to only consider as concrete poetry work which manifested or responded to the tenets of classical style reflects the fact that this was the only universal connotation of English and Scottish poets' description of their work as such: besides its emphasis of language as material. This use is context specific, and not designed to preclude others. In the second case, although this definition logically excludes anything other than classical style from consideration as a universal influence upon concrete poetry, others influences must clearly be cited in relation either to particular concrete poets, or to a significant proportion of them. The latter category incorporates the influences upon classical concrete itself, and the other incarnation of concrete poetry mentioned above, as well as

the different early-twentieth-century precedents for that development: all are discussed at the relevant junctures.[3]

It should be emphasised, before proceeding, that by the late-1960s the originators of classical style had themselves moved on to new stylistic territory. In 1963, for example, Haroldo de Campos began his huge unpunctuated prose sequence *Galaxias* (1984), "in which the excesses of the baroque reappear with unexpected vigour" (Bessa and Cisneros, xxi).[4] By describing these poets as the engineers of that style, therefore, I do not imply their incapacity to transfigure or move beyond it, an impression which might arise from this chapter's necessary focus on their early, most quintessentially "classical" work.

## The Origins of Classical Style and the Concrete Movement

In 1954, the Swiss poet Eugen Gomringer became secretary to the concrete artist Max Bill at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm. The following year, the Brazilian poet Décio Pignatari, cofounder of the São Paulo-based poetry collective Noigandres, travelled to Ulm, where he and Gomringer met. This encounter, Bann's anthology introduction states, generated both "a channel of communication" and an agreement to identify their work "by one common title" (7). Gomringer's first consistent written use of the term "concrete poetry" was in the preface to an unpublished 1956 anthology, later republished as "Concrete Poetry"; the Noigandres' work became known as "poesia concreta" after its inclusion in a Concrete Art exhibition at the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art later that year (ibid.). Clearly, that 1955 meeting revealed a similarity of existing ideas and cultural backgrounds meriting exploration.

Gomringer was a student of literature and concrete art who had experimented with other forms of poetry before concrete, influences ranging from Arno Holz and Mallarmé to Shakespearean sonnets (Gomringer "The First Years of Concrete Poetry" 17-18). The Hoschschule was a design school cofounded by Bill, an ex-Bauhaus student, in 1953. Under Bill's rectorship (1953-56) it espoused Bauhaus-forged beliefs in the capacity of constructed objects to harmonise human interaction by soliciting common emotional responses, inflected by a desire to reformulate national cultural morality and rebuild economic infrastructure and international relations after the war. A student base from 49 countries epitomised an attendant internationalist outlook which the concrete

movement would appropriate. Its compulsory "Basic Course" aimed to "overcome the opposition between pure knowledge and habitual action" through "practical exercises and allied systematic investigations" (Maldonado). This socialist-inflected notion of praxis bespoke an academic inheritance from the Bauhaus and first-generation Frankfurt theorists, tempered both by the residual essentialist notions of aesthetic experience which Bill also transported from the Bauhaus, and, perhaps, by the school's creation through a DM 1,000,000.00 donation from the American High Commissioner. Michael Erlhoff contends that this hampered its ability to forward models of social interaction whose correlative economic theories would be too incompatible with free market models of economic recovery (44). The resultant academic atmosphere, which combined Marxist sociology with humanistic notions of innate emotional responses and moral values, saturates Gomringer's attempts to produce new, stable fields of conceptual interaction between words through new spatial relations on the page. He had been making similar attempts prior to 1955, and in 1954 wrote "From Line to Constellation", a statement outlining "the new poem": "simple", visually perceptible "as a whole as well as in its parts", "an object to be both seen and used … containing thought but made concrete through play-activity". His first concrete poems, initially named "constellations" after Mallarmé, were published in 1953, but he began experimenting with the form in 1951, finishing his first, "Avenidas", in 1952.

Pignatari was an instructor of industrial design and communication theory who formed the Noigandres group with the brothers Augusto and Haroldo de Campos – critics, translators and polyglots – in São Paulo in 1952. All three were highly educated in concrete art, serialist music and contemporary world literature, exhaustively referencing the early-twentieth-century European avant-gardes in their critical writing. The Noigandres operated during what Antonio Sergio Bessa describes as "a brief utopian moment in Brazil's political history", whose primary symbols were architectural, many articulating the 1920s European and Soviet constructivist aesthetics from which Bauhaus and latterly Ulm aesthetics had grown (*Öyvind Fahlström* 5). Of the impact of architecture on 1930s-40s Brazil, Bessa states:

> The radical views on urban planning that swept Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century encountered a blank slate in a country striving to overcome its colonial past. One needs only to be reminded of two landmark projects to understand the visionary, if not messianic, role ascribed to architecture at the

> time: Le Corbusier's "corniche extensions" proposal for Rio de Janeiro in 1930 and the construction of Brasilia in the 1950s [by] Oscar Niemeyer and Lucio Costa.…[T]he scope was monumental and geared toward bending history's path. In this context, modernist architecture was identified with social and political progress, and "concrete," both as building material and concept, became the embodiment of a utopian program that aimed to replace the "empty words" of old political rhetoric with the tangential materiality of the "here and now." (8) [5]

The Noigandres' 1958 "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry" directly references Costa's "Pilot Plan" for the country's new capital, constructed from 1956-60, exemplifying the formative effect of architectural tropes on their literature, also evident from their publication of articles presaging the "Pilot Plan" in *Arquititetura e Decoração* magazine ("Architecture and Interior Design") (*ÖF* 5). Costa's influence is poetically expressed in Augusto's poem "Quadra", which visually mimics the layout of Brasilia's residential "Superquadra" districts. The Noigandres were also exploring a near-concrete style prior to 1955, Augusto composing his *Poetamenos* ("Poetminus") poems early in 1953, using colours to direct reading and designate word theme in a manner inspired by Schoenberg's twelve-tone compositions.[6]

The meeting thus facilitated a convergence of existing literary aesthetics both influenced by theories of architecture and design, and by institutional or national discourses espousing utopian social development through existing social frameworks, broadly interpretable in an international context of post-war cultural renewal. This was reflected in a poetics of measured formal innovation, wherein the individual visual forms of, and visual interaction between, linguistic units on a page was to programmatically enhance or alter their semantic value.

Throughout the 1950s-60s, international cells of activity sprang up in response to this model of poetic practice – in many cases, existing work was reoriented in relation to it – exponentially expanding the concrete movement, and transforming that model in the process. Bann's 1967 anthology makes a speculative but useful attempt to attribute geographical boundaries to this movement, and to relate it to classical concrete principles, positing Latin, Germanic and Anglo-American wings. The first is mainly Brazilian, containing poets such as Ronaldo Azeredo, Edgard Braga, José Lino Grünewald and Pedro Xisto – mostly associated with the post-Noigandres "Invenção" group – alongside the original Noigandres poets. The Germanic group can be seen to

comprise several subgroups, all connected to Gomringer, not all of whom Bann represents: the Darmstadt circle of Claus Bremer, the American Emmett Williams and Daniel Spoerri; the Stuttgart Group, including Max Bense, Hansjörg Mayer and Reinhard Döhl; and the Vienna Group, including Gerhard Rühm, Ernst Jandl, Friedrich Achleitner and others. Bann's avowedly less coherent Anglo-American section contains Robert Lax, Jonathon Williams, Bann himself, Ian Hamilton Finlay, John Furnival, Dom Sylvester Houédard, Edwin Morgan and Emmett Williams. The artistic incoherence of this latter group, as well as the inclusion of the Frenchman Pierre Garnier and Mexican Mathias Goeritz in the Latin section, along with the oversight of hubs of activity such as Japan, reflects the difficulty of delineating the concrete movement either geographically or stylistically by the late 1960s.

Classical Style

Accepting the imperfect correlation of style and movement, classical concrete poems are united in their tendency towards visual rather than sonic emphasis – although phonetic permutation is often vital to their effect – and by their presentation on single pages or surfaces, lending them the cumulative visual impact of sculptures or artworks; however, some cover several pages or surfaces. They are usually meticulously typeset in sans serif fonts like Helvetica or Futura, though some acolytes like Claus Bremer used typewriters to generate new visual effects. Their primary difference from some concrete poetry is that the conceptual meaning of words and signs is never abandoned or attacked by the visual arrangement. Instead, through systematic visual modulation, they are either endowed with a number of alternative significations, or have existing meanings emphasised. It was this, rather than the material rendering of language per se, which set them apart from their Dadaist and Futurist forebears, connoting an attachment to language's pre-existing meanings. In rare instances, such as Brazilian "semiotic poetry", non-semantic signifiers were used, but always with significatory purpose.

The following section assesses some exemplary classical poems by recourse to artistic precedents. I largely discuss constructivism and concrete art in relation to Gomringer, and the style's literary prehistory in relation to the Noigandres. Although both influences were shared, Gomringer's sense of his work's cultural purpose – "the

poem as functional object": a primary determinant of his style – was particularly indebted to constructivism's functional aesthetics, as carried down through concrete art.

Rather than offering an exhaustive definition of those aesthetics, I will define those features especially pertinent to an understanding of classical concrete. Constructivism, then, was an artistic, sculptural and architectural movement developed in Russia from the late 1910s and in Europe from the 1920s, where its aesthetics became associated with the Bauhaus School. As Bann asserts, glossing a formative statement of European constructivism, the style operated after "the dadaist critique" of previous Western assertions of art's cultural value – notably the idea that representative art could incite shared sentiments regarding its objects – seeking "laws of art reformulated from firm and objective bases" ("Raoul Hausmann, Hans Arp, Ivan Puni, and László Moholy-Nagy: 'A Call for Elementarist Art' (1921)" 51). These bases were rooted in dialectical aesthetics – rejecting the ascription of static values to the physical or philosophical substance of the universe – and an attempt to represent the ever-changing, invisible scientific processes generating the universe's physical and philosophical appearances.

This impulse to render scientific and mechanical process resulted in the visualisation of permutational over static, and nonfigurative over figurative forms, and, at its logical threshold, attempts not just to represent but to enact mechanical processes, blurring the roles of artistic and functional objects. Gabo and Pevsner's "Realistic Manifesto" (1920), an inaugural Soviet constructivist tract, championed artworks constructed "*as the universe constructs its own, as the engineer constructs his bridges, as the mathematician his formula of the orbits*" (9; italics in orig.):

> *1. Thence in painting we renounce colour … the idealised optical surface of objects.…We affirm that the tone of a substance, i.e. its light absorbing material body is its only pictorial reality.*
> *2. We renounce in a line, its descriptive value….We affirm the line only as a direction of the static forces and rhythms in objects.*
> *3. We renounce volume as a pictorial and plastic form of space.…We affirm depth as the only pictorial and plastic form of space.* (9-10)

Such assertions are manifested in projects like Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*, which the neo-constructivist artist Joost Baljeu took to reflect "an

acceptance of space as dynamic space … in accordance with new scientific theories such as Einstein's" (112).

The idea of "dynamic space" was also politically expedient, superseding a static notion of physical reality with a dialectical one conducive to Soviet invocations of the coextensive psychological revolution of society. Gabo and Pevsner's manifesto is both scientific and mythical-political, envisioning Man's simultaneous penetration of the universe's spiritual and physical secrets through technologically augmented perception: a "surge of the masses toward the possession of the riches of Nature" (7).

One philosophical underpinning of constructivism, a primarily architectural and sculptural movement, which might have legitimated literary adoption of its techniques, is outlined in Bann's introduction to *The Tradition of Constructivism*:

> There do exist such "sympathetic metaphors" … particularly appropriate to specific branches of art and literature, but [which] … reflect so basic a truth that they can be applied to the whole range of creative activity. There is no reason why a novel should not be created or analysed in terms of construction, just as there is no reason why Gaudi the architect should not conceive of a building "representing waves on a stormy day". ("Constructivism and Constructive Art in the Twentieth Century" xxviii)

Once the essential patterns of formal interaction behind sensory phenomena, which transcended medium boundaries, were disclosed, they could underpin the construction of a novel as successfully as a cathedral, provided the compositional process which unearthed them was sufficiently psychologically detached. This was the gauge, Bann states, of the objectivity of constructivist metaphor (ibid.).

Constructivism's non-mimetic impulse was carried down to Gomringer through concrete art, which reintegrated constructivist notions of functionality into a more recognisable model of artistic value, assigning compositional elements such as colour objective cognitive values, thus measurable cultural effects. Theo Van Deosburg is credited with defining concrete art in his brief 1930 manifesto "Basis of Concrete Painting", which associates universality of expression with the rational transcendence of subjective representative impulses: "1. Art is universal. 2. The work of art must be entirely conceived and formed by the mind before its execution. It must receive nothing from nature's given forms, or from sensuality, or sentimentality". Kandinsky's "Concrete Art" (1938) is another relevant clarion call, but Gomringer was particularly

attuned to the concrete art of two ex-Bauhaus students, Josef Albers and Max Bill. Interestingly, in his 1968 text *Josef Albers*, Gomringer noted Albers's capacity to link "rationality with sensibility" through "the psychic effect of autonomous colour", suggesting that Albers's assignation of objective value to colour involved a marriage of rationality and intuition distinct from Van Doesburg's stringent anti-subjectivism, but comparable to the terms of his own poetics (8). In an interview published in 1960, Albers stated: "[c]olor … behaves like man—in two distinct ways: first in self-realization and then in the realization of relationships with others. In my paintings, I have tried to make two polarities meet - independence and interdependence" (11). If colours, or composed objects, could be shown to behave "independently" – to display inherent, discernible characteristics – then they could solicit common emotional responses, bridging the chasms of perceptual difference engendering cultural conflict, thereby becoming "functional objects".[7]

Gomringer transposed these ideals of independent aesthetic form and functionality onto words, a desire further induced by Hochschule notions of shared perceptual values.[8] In 1955 he was teaching on the college's "information course", formed on the belief that "the social order is decisively influenced by the quality of information purveyed by press, radio, motion pictures, and television". The course aimed to develop "unambiguous and comprehensible linguistic techniques" for "press statements, advertising copy, scientific texts, art criticism, and elsewhere" ("HfG Info, 1955-56"). The equation of arts writing with functional public copy presages not only Gomringer's assertion that poems should be "as easily understood as signs in airports" ("The Poem as Functional Object" 70), but his belief in a language of concentrated and measurable cognitive function:

> Concrete poem structures can … unite various kinds of language,…unite the view of the world expressed in the mother tongue with physical reality. Concrete poetry is founded upon the contemporary scientific-technical view of the world and will come into its own in the synthetic-rationalistic world of tomorrow. ("Concrete Poetry" 68)

Besides the influence of Ulm morality, and concrete art's notions of innate aesthetic values, such statements inherited constructivism's antecedent mythical-political impulse,

and faith in science: an Edenic cultural epoch of unmediated connectivity with nature is projected into a technologically redeemed future.

Suffice to say, a language of independent forms – which embodied the things they signified – would not be a language but those things themselves. As Wendy Steiner notes, "semiotically, 'concrete art' is a contradiction in terms. Paintings and poems are by definition signs rather than things, except in the sense that ultimately a sign is a thing; a poem that is literally a tree or a rose is not a poem but that tree or rose" (197). Gomringer's early concrete poems thus partly comprised a series of metaphors for "thingness"; concreteness. This partly involved radically paring down his linguistic lexicon, imbuing all retained words with a sense of fundamental veracity, enhanced by repetition which, according to Bann's anthology introduction, "cancel[led] all particular impressions. The propositions exist not in the ordinary framework of social discourse, but in that semantic space which Osgood used to plot the answers to his questions 'whether, say, black is more sad than gay, more heavy than light'" (8).[9] The attempt to stabilise word values underpins the poem "Du Blau" (1953), in which the word "du" is proceeded by five colour-names – "blau", "rot", "gelb", "schwarz", "weiss" – over five lines before standing alone on the sixth. By repeatedly appealing to the reader's inner psychological space through the second person singular, and to a shared sensory environment by invoking common perceptual associations – colours – this poem emblematises an empathy bordering telepathy.

But the most easily appropriable and philosophically resonant metaphor for thingness was visibility. Of his poetry's "visual aspect", Gomringer notes: "the distribution of signs follows an inherent law, and certain systems evolve therefrom. This is a matter of bare linguistic structure, and the visible form of concrete poetry is identical to its structure, as is the case with architecture" ("Concrete Poetry" 67). "Visible form" is "identical" to "bare linguistic structure". Gomringer's projected "semantic space" of objective meaning comprised a language not of words, but of vision, wherein black was objectively more sad than gay, even if the word "black" was not. Thingness was rendered through a lexicon of graphical effects appropriated from constructivism and concrete art. "Silence" perhaps alludes to Alber's *Homage to the Square* series.


Fig. 1. Eugen Gomringer, "Silence".

A black frame of words around an unmade but contained white space, it offsets the obdurate partiality of linguistic signs – a window before the world – against the wordless elucidation of sight: the inner sanctum. Besides problematising language, however, "Silence" functions as "bare linguistic structure" by subtly supplementing language with vision. The visual allegory, that is, is non-specific enough to be imagined as operating within the piece's more obvious linguistic connotation, alchemically augmenting our semantic understanding of silence. The two are experienced simultaneously: "isomorphically", to use "Pilot Plan" terminology (71).

"Silence" is unusual, however, in tangentially resembling a physical object (a window). Concrete's appeal to constructivism generally involved seeing past appearances, past the limits of the physiological eye to the invisible scientific processes generating vision's surface-level effects. The "Pilot Plan" asserts:

> In a first moment of concrete poetry pragmatics, isomorphism tends to physiognomy, that is a movement imitating natural appearances (*motion)*.…In a more advanced stage, isomorphism tends to resolve itself into pure structural

> movement (*movement* properly said); at this phase, geometric form and mathematics of composition (sensible rationalism) prevail. (72)

This legacy of nonfigurative expression is evident in Gomringer's thematic and visual treatment of invisible natural forces in works such as "o".

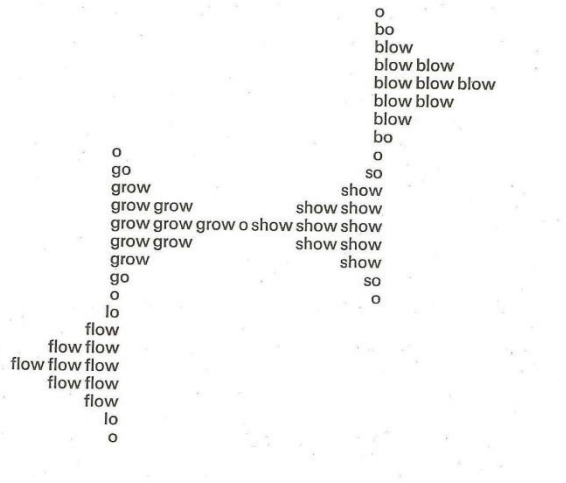



Fig. 2. Eugen Gomringer, "o".

Besides evidencing his debt to graphic and sculptural art movements, Gomringer's interest in visuality reflected the broader capacity of ocular phenomenato assume non-referentiality. They provided an ideal plane for allegorising sensory ascension to the unmediated truths which would be the touchstone of his "scientific-rational" utopia, an ascension language could not achieve without surrendering its fundamental mediatory function.

But Gomringer also remained committed to language, precisely because it meant things, setting his work apart from the purely optical poetry which followed it:

> I make logical, atomistic and graphic experiments … only as stimulation and discipline.
>
> I find it wisest to stay with the word, even with the usual meanings of the word….The purpose of reduced language is not the reduction of language itself but the achievement of greater flexibility and freedom of communication (with

> its inherent need for rules and regulations). ("The Poem as Functional Object" 69)

Uniting "the view of the world expressed in the mother tongue with physical reality" required both language's ability to describe, retaining the rules necessary for society's functioning, and vision's ability to pre-rationally imbibe the "actual". Ultimately, therefore, Gomringer retained vision in an auxiliary, if elucidatory relationship to linguistic statement.

The classicists' interests in contemporary linguistic science and information theory, and in forming the first international poetry movement, reflect this homogenising linguistic urge. Indeed, notwithstanding their visual influences, their desire for veracious summations of experience was partly an archetypal literary modernist gesture. As Marjorie Perloff notes, "the declared enemy of modernism was said to be artifice….[T]he fear that the word will no longer adhere to the object haunts [its] poetics" (*Radical Artifice* 31). Steiner surmises that if concrete "is the dead end of verbal art", "it is a dead end to which poetry has aspired for centuries" (203-04).

The Noigandres were also highly educated in concrete art, but referenced classical concrete's literary heritage more extensively than Gomringer. [10] Their description of their poems as "ideograms" is a nod to Ernesto Fenollosa's study of Chinese pictograms, "Noigandres" a neologism of Pound's *Cantos*. Their "Pilot Plan", whilst referencing architecture and concrete art, also covers Mallarmé, literary modernism – predominantly imagism – and Fenollosa's ideogram study: the impact of all three should be considered. As with Gomringer, the end towards which these influences were channelled was an intimate visual transcription of natural processes reintegrated into linguistic signification for progressive social ends, as implied by the "Pilot Plan's" opening assertion. "Concrete poetry: product of a critical evolution of forms. Assuming that the historical cycle of verse (as formal-rhythmic unity) is closed, concrete poetry begins by being aware of graphic space as structural agent". Moving out of a conspicuously literary prehistory – the "historical cycle of verse" – the Noigandres postulate a poetics rooted in an indigenous visual logic of composition – "graphic space as a structural agent" – nonetheless intended to "structure" linguistic effects (71).

It is peculiar, given the materialised language they were striving for, that they cite Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés* as their first forerunner, given that poem's tendency to re-

emphasise through its spatial arrangements the free-floating, unstable nature of linguistic meaning implied by its fragmentary semantic imagery. Nonetheless, the "Pilot Plan" writes Mallarmé into a genealogy of quasi-scientific investigations into graphic semiotics: "[f]orerunners: Mallarmé (*Un coup de dés*, 1897): the first qualitative jump: 'subdivisions prismatiques de l'idée'; space ('blancs') and typographical devices as substantive elements of composition" (71). For the Noigandres, the material forms and spatial relationships between Mallarmé's letter-things – transcriptions of the infinite inter-relationship of "things" comprising the universe – were the essence of their meaning.

The ideal of a thing-language is more easily attributable to the imagists, with their calls for a "poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite", adhering to the contours of its objects via linguistic "concentration" of their physical characteristics (Lowell 34-36). Pound and cummings are cited in the "Pilot Plan", as is Joyce. Though Joyce's agglutinating lexicon might seem antithetical to classical constriction, its influence can be sensed in the tendency towards paragram, portmanteau and wordplay already evident in the Noigandres' classical phase.[11] T.E. Hulme's proto-imagist endorsement of "dry, hard, classical verse" (79), a "visual concrete" language, intended to "make you continuously see a physical thing, to prevent you gliding through an abstract process" (80), seems a more intuitive precursor, though the plan does not mention him.

The poetic model into which such influences were incorporated is exemplified in pieces like Augusto de Campos's "Sem um Numero", and Haroldo's "Forma de Fome", which place a series of systematic lexical modulations or dissections of a single phrase across a series of predetermined locations on a page.

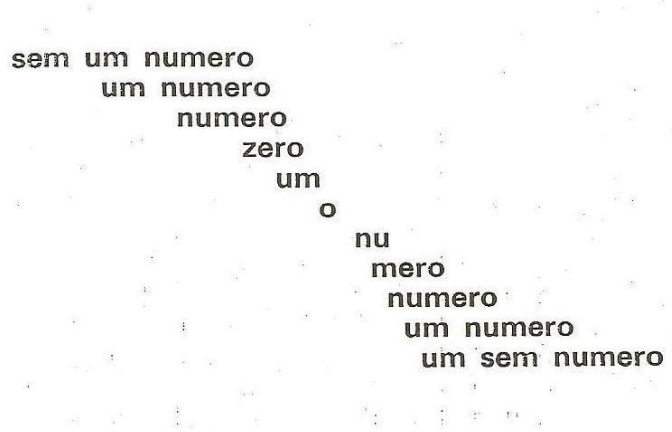



Fig. 3. Augusto de Campos, "Sem um Numero".

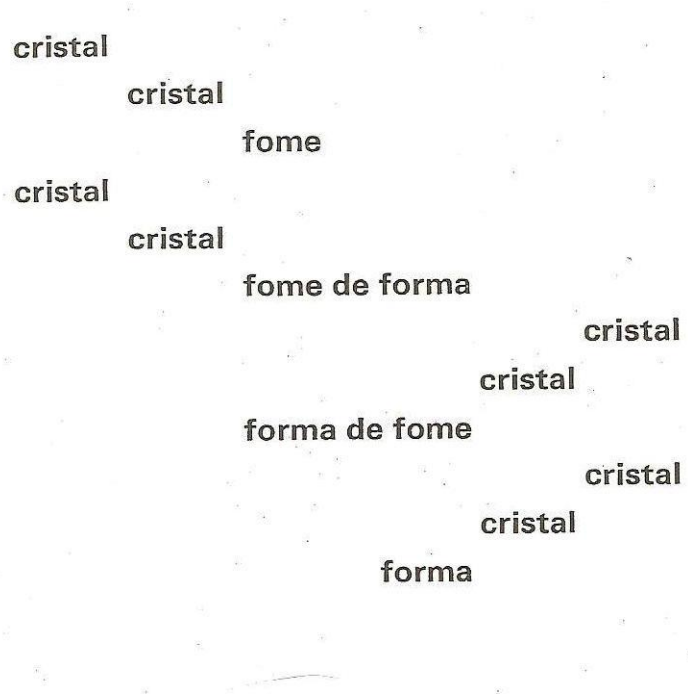



Fig. 4. Haroldo de Campos, "Forma de Fome".

Manifesting their constructivist influences, the visual forms suggest three-dimensional spirals or centrifugal contortions of matter, perhaps microscopic genetic structures – Watson and Crick's double-helix DNA model was published in 1953 – or imperceptible gravitational fields. Non-figurative motion is sophisticatedly figured. The apparent incremental alteration of semantic value through physical displacement of words, meanwhile, enacts the metaphorical inversion of semantic dominance over typography outlined in the "Pilot Plan".

Interestingly though, both poems undercut rather than enhance semantic stability, generating political critiques by creating radical differences in linguistic meaning through minute visual-phonetic modulations. Haroldo's is self-critical, as Bann's anthology introduction reveals, offsetting his aesthetic concerns – "forme de fome" 'hunger for form' – against an acknowledgement that for most human beings hunger is a more literal problem: "fome de forma" 'form from hunger' (17). The verbal matter of "Sem um Numero" 'without a number' – a reference, Willard Bohn notes, to the exclusion of impoverished peasants from governmental welfare systems – is visually constricted around a central point of tension to become "zero", revealing the status of their stake in society (Bohn *Modern Visual Poetry* 251-52). Below the poem's fulcrum –

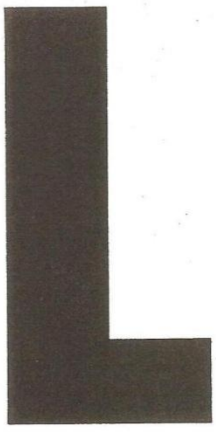
formed from the ideograph for zero, numerically transcribing the sentiment – the textual material expands again, spelling out at the furthest point of its orbit "um sem numero" 'numberless'. We are reminded of the population explosion in Brazil at this time: the number of the unaccounted for (ibid.).

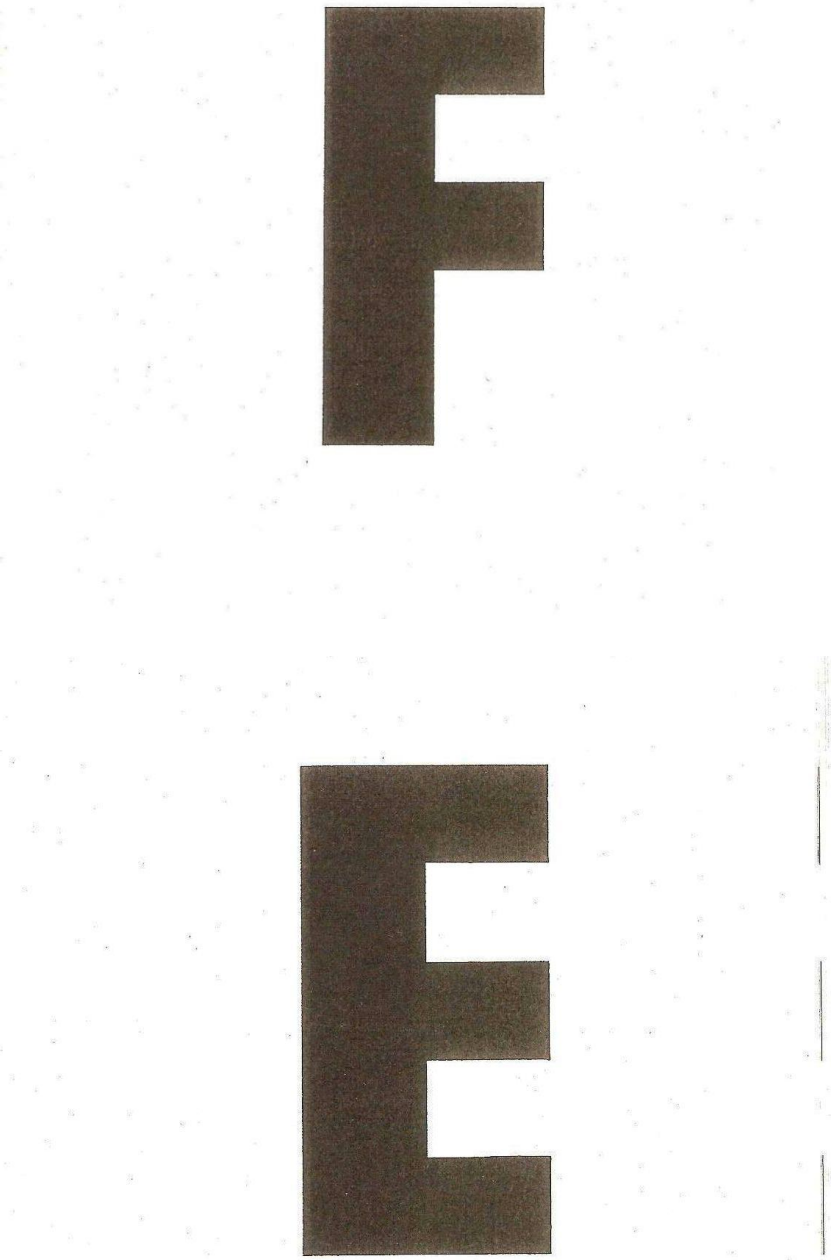
Ultimately then, whilst spatial placement appears to direct semantic value, this is really a means of disguising authorial input: one semantic expression superseding another. This technique, which Edwin Morgan also explored, roots such poems in a less singular genealogy of invention than the "Pilot Plan" suggests, but its acerbic political impetus does distinguish the Noigandres' poetics from Gomringer's humane idealism, more concerned with stabilising fundamental word values.

As with "Du Blau", such efforts do not, perhaps, represent comprehensive implementation of classical principles. To consider a piece which does, we must explore the influence of Fenollosa's study of Chinese ideograms. By Fenollosa's reckoning – which in fact overlooks the ideogram's phonetic function – each ideogram (the Chinese equivalent of a word) comprises a "vivid shorthand picture" of its referent, rather than a combination of phonetic signs from a predetermined list. This crystallises the essence of those referent phenomena where phonetic languages, controlled by their own arbitrary internal logic, would alienate us from them (12). Moreover, whereas Western sentence structures rigidify words into nouns, adjectives, verbs or predicates, Chinese contains no consistent delineations of word-function. Thus, Fenollosa argues, whilst the former perpetuates the myth of discrete, self-sufficient agents and objects with auxiliary functions and qualities, ideograms acknowledge that natural objects and phenomena only exist in and through their transitive relationship to all others, in ever-changing spatiotemporal forms. The verbal and nominal, for example, are co-dependent energies in every ideogram: something is only ever something doing something. Fenollosa also notes the ideogram's ability to relate "the greater part of natural truth … hidden in processes too minute for vision", by analogy with perceptible processes, the constituent relations of the two being identical (26): "primitive metaphors do not spring from arbitrary *subjective* processes. They are possible only because they follow objective lines of relations in nature herself" (ibid.). As in constructivist metaphor then, vision is not truth, but can transcribe truth.

Western languages are redeemable, Fenollosa states, because "almost all" the Sanskrit root-words underlying European languages are "primitive verbs", expressing

"characteristic actions of visible nature". Their natural motility could thus be partly restored through an emphasis on verbs over nouns (17). The classical concretists' proclivity to verbs and abstract nouns – affective qualities as objects – bespeaks Fenollosa's influence, also brilliantly expressed in Pignatari's "Life". Spread over six rectos of Bann's anthology, the title word's large, capitalised, sans serif letters cover the first four.





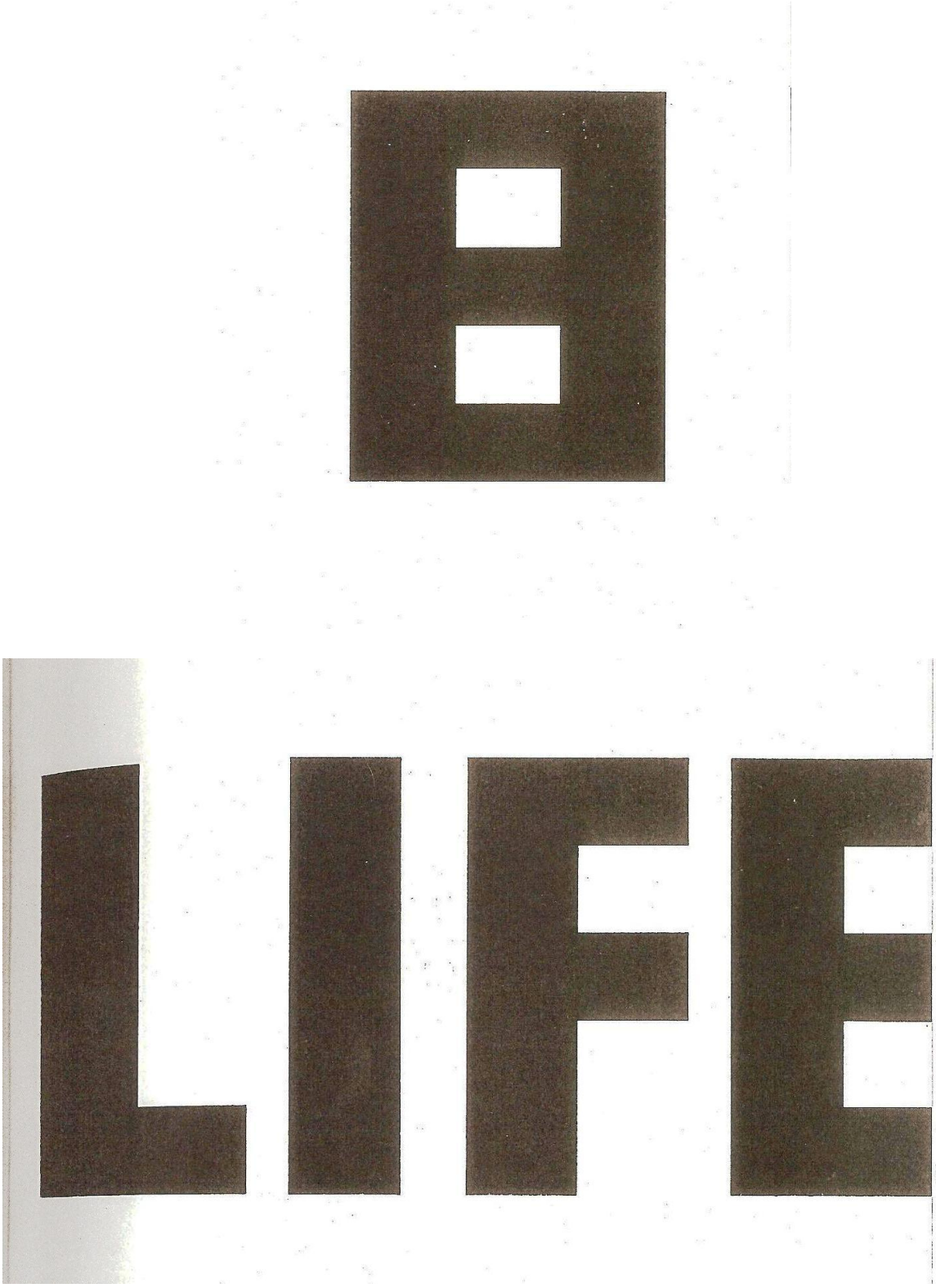



Fig. 5. Décio Pignatari, “Life”.

This is partly a deliberative unveiling of the arbitrary building materials of sense in phonetic languages. Dispossessing letters of their cumulative semantic value, Pignatari highlights their lack of inherent visual or phonic significance. But the piece also has an alternative, incremental visual logic, emphasised by the reversal of *I* and *L* in transgression of expected grammatical sequence. Around a constant vertical, *I*, a rightwards baseline bar is first added to create *L*, subsequently replaced by two bars at mean-line and cap-line to make an *F*, before all preceding forms coalesce in *E*. This visual reading must compete with the predisposition to see these shapes as phonetic signifiers, but assumes full control on the fifth page, when a further vertical stem is added to create a wholly non-semantic symbol. Bann notes its resemblance to the Chinese ideogram for the sun, particularly significant given Fenollosa's description of that character: "[t]he Chinese have one word, ming or mei. Its ideograph is the sign of the sun together with the sign of the moon. It serves as verb, noun, adjective" (22). In Western languages, by contrast, to "get a tolerably concrete noun, we have to leave behind the verb and adjective roots and light upon a thing arbitrarily cut off from its power of action, say 'the sun' or 'the moon' " (ibid.): or the word "LIFE", printed on the final page, rendered unwieldy next to the multilateral visual-philosophical resonance of Pignatari's sun, yet oddly charged with its resonance. Solt comments that the poem's typeface is taken from the American magazine *Life*, rendering the message politically tendentious: a phonetic language of alienated signifiers, co-opted by consumerism, is subsumed by an ideogrammatic language of apparently indigenous graphical evolutions, nourished by the sun, source of organic life ("A World Look at Concrete Poetry" 62).

One way of suggesting a more extensive lexicon of visually co-ordinated words was incorporating visual allegory into semantic verse, as in "Sem um Numero". Another was the purely pictographic poetry which members of the post-Noigandres collective Invenção explored from 1964 onwards, under the banner of "semiotic poetry". Houédard credits this genre's conception to discussions between the Noigandres and the semiotician and concrete poet Max Bense at a colloquium on aesthetics at Bense's workplace, Stuttgart University, which "led to noigandres manifesto of semiotic poetry dec-64 (pbd 65)[;] this was all being worked out in 1963" ("Poetry Theory and Poetry Theoria" 6). [12] Poems such as Pignatari's, below, emphasise elementary graphic distinctions between compositional elements in a manner nonetheless intended to yield semiotic value ("Pelé").[13]

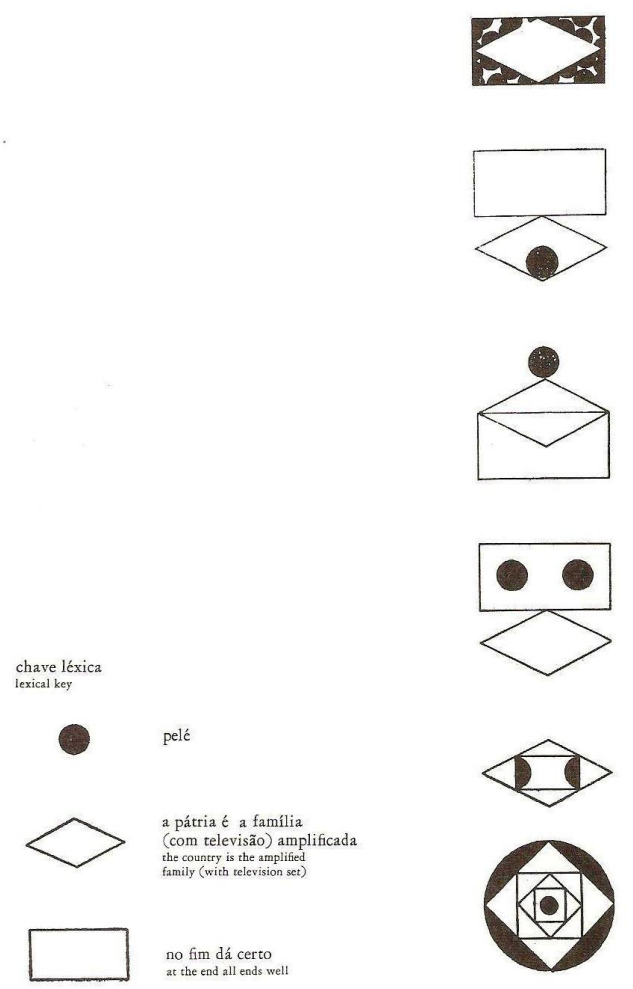



Fig. 6. Décio Pignatari, "Pelé".

What binds semantic and pictographic poems together is a desire, like Gomringer's, for concrete poetry to serve a cultural function by stabilising and homogenising conceptual values. This poem's key in Portuguese denotes the fact that these were allegorical-artistic rather than practical exercises. Concrete poetry could not, of course, become the national tongue without an unprecedentedly seismic shift in collective consciousness, as Augusto de Campos acknowledged in a 1957 essay, granting concrete a more precise, corrective role within collective language: not as "a panacea" but an entity with an "autonomous function", "vivifying and making dynamic [language's] dead cells", "impeding the atrophy of the common organism" ("The Concrete Coin of Speech" 170).

Critical Analysis of Classical Concrete

Given the inceptive value of critical self-presentation to classical concrete poetry, it is worth exploring some further contemporaneous critical accounts of the style, to ascertain other aesthetic and ethical functions with which it was credited. Such accounts can be speculatively divided into those which re-authorise subjectivist or "expressionist" compositional techniques – to borrow a term from Mike Weaver – and those which attempt to specify the nature of concrete poetry's objectivity of expression. Weaver's 1966 article "Concrete Poetry" exemplifies the former impulse; critical accounts appropriating semiotic terminology, notably Mary Ellen Solt's reading of Eugen Gomringer through C.S. Peirce's sign theory, embody the latter. These two accounts are considered in turn below, the failure of the latter theory to prove the definitude of concrete expression presented as one reason for the demise of classical style and the concrete movement by the late 1960s.

Weaver's article divides concrete poetry into three categories according to desired focus of engagement – optic, kinetic, and phonetic – and two camps of compositional and interpretive technique – expressionist and constructivist – noting that most poets can be periodically described by all five terms. Optic poems are those with a visual layout designed to elicit a single visual engagement: one realisation of the possible graphical interrelationships of constituent linguistic units. "Silence" is a quintessential optic concrete poem. Kinetic poems transcribe several permutations of a visual system or systems, instigating a reading process comprising several distinct but related ocular engagements. "Life", then, is a kinetic poem. Phonetic poems are designed to incite a sense of phonic rather than visual permutation; much of the concrete poetry of the Vienna Group, notably Ernst Jandl's 1957 poem "Schützengraben", which shuffles segments of the German word for "trench", fits this description.

"Constructivist/expressionist" is a more ambivalent distinction. Whilst not comprising as profound a methodological split as that between "clean" and "dirty" concrete prevalent by the late 1960s, it alludes to nascent spontaneous impulses in classical composition prefiguring such developments, and to the differences between definitions of concrete expression even in its classical manifestation. Distinguishing between constructivist and expressionist composition, Weaver notes: "[t]he intervals may be arrived at either by calculation or by intuition, or by both. Calculation places the

emphasis on the exact disposition of material according to a structural principle, intuition relies on the fusing power of the individual sensibility" (102).[14] Weaver takes Finlay's *Canal Stripe 3* to exemplify expressionist composition: "[i]n the third sequence *windmill* is dropped; reason bows to intuition as the reader's pace quickens before the familiar combinations, and the schema completes the poem: *haystack cathedral houseboat windmill*" (105). The expressionism described here is not the overhaul of constructivist cognition by "dirty" concretists. Various permutations are removed from a kinetic system whose incremental logic is clear enough for the reader to fill in the missing steps. The poet's expressionism involves subjectively imbibing the mathematical system and transcribing it in shorthand; the interpreter's expressionism fills in the missing pieces through the same inference. "Expressionism", as defined by Weaver, is thus a means of abbreviating or customising, rather than an alternative to, constructivist composition: not a distinction encompassing the whole range of concrete poetry, but an important means of nuancing the creative possibilities of classical method.

This might be viewed as an attempt to grant classical concrete poetry greater longevity. A different tactic involved attempting to concretise its social function by precisely assessing how it was able to transpose broad cultural patterns of thought more effectively than semantic language: by proving its objectivity. To this end, more technical theories of meaning-making were incorporated from the world of semiotics. This connection was partly rooted in concretists like Gomringer and Bense's attempts to pre-programme the information value of text at Ulm and Stuttgart, partly in the synchronicity of the two movements' heydays, and partly in the latter allowing analysis of the former through "the privileged terms of science", as Steiner notes in a discussion of semiotic bases for inter-art analogy (19). One semiotic theory expedient to concrete poetics was C.S. Peirce's distinction between symbols and icons, which underpins Solt's 1982 article "Charles Sanders Peirce and Eugen Gomringer", focused on Gomringer's poem "Ping Pong".[15]

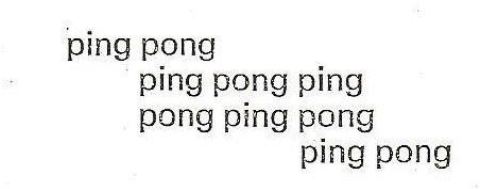



Fig. 7. Gomringer, "Ping Pong".

As Solt notes, Peirce labelled signs, in relation to their objects, "symbols", "indexes" or "icons". Symbols denote objects by arbitrary convention. Letters, phonemes, and all words except onomatopoeias are symbols. Indexes are "existentially or causally related" to their objects, reliant on the object's presence to function; Steiner's example is a finger pointing at a house (19-20). Icons, by contrast, represent objects by formal similarity, and it is iconicity – intimate adherence to the characteristics of the object – which concrete poets were most interested in rendering. Interestingly, Peirce asserts that an object becomes iconic "by virtue of characteristics which belong to it in itself as a sensible object" (qtd. in Solt "Peirce and Gomringer" 199). Therefore icons cannot be made, but become iconic by natural likeness. This would suggest that iconic concrete poems compose themselves, a useful guarantor of ontological fidelity, and again strongly reminiscent of constructivism's "natural metaphors".

Solt posits several levels of iconicity in "Ping Pong", of varying degrees of abstractness. Most simply, "[i]ts percussive, alliterative 'p's' and alternating 'i's' and 'o's' coupled with the repeated final alliterative 'ng's', bounce back and forth within the visual structure like a ping pong ball in an actual game" ("Peirce and Gomringer" 199). But besides the poem being visually iconic in graphic layout, and semantically iconic

through onomatopoeia, the cognitive process of reading it is also iconic, Solt contends At this point Peirce's subdivisions of iconicity, highlighted by Steiner, become noteworthy:

> A sign which *substantially* replicates its object, e.g., a model of a house showing doors, windows [etc.] is called an image …; a sign whose *relations* replicate those of its object, e.g., a blueprint of a house, is called a diagram … and a sign that represents what Peirce terms the "representative character" of another sign through a *parallelism*, e.g., "snail shell" used for "house" … is a metaphor. (20)

By this count the poem is a visual diagram and perhaps a sonic image. The notion of metaphors, however, which need not bear any physical similarity to their objects, licenses a very broad discussion on Solt's part of Gomringer's "iconic" representation of an indefinite interplay between polarities through the solicited reading process, which "suggests a ping pong net with 'pong' at the beginning of the poem bouncing over it to 'pong' at the end … and, by inference, back to 'ping' at the beginning again" (200-01). For Solt, this sense of interplay has grand metaphorical connotations, iconically representing " 'the game of life',…thesis-antithesis, yin-yang, all binary relationships", as emphasised by "the alternation of the 'i' (I) and the 'o' (the zero, nothingness)" (201). Engagement with the poem's mechanical composition, meanwhile, is taken to iconise the "synthetic-rational mentality" which Gomringer saw as characteristic of the new Man. In essence, Solt claims, the poem reflects Gomringer's view that "language" as such "stands in an iconic relationship to culture" (202).

The idea that our engagement with a concrete poem might *itself* be iconic of culturally mediated thought, speech or writing allowed a subtler appreciation of those poems' socio-cultural value than that which demands explicit imitative nods through onomatopoeia or picture. However, as Steiner notes, the breadth of the term "metaphor" in many adaptations of Peirce's theory renders both it, and the term "icon", descriptively obsolete: every symbol, and thus all language, is potentially iconic, because every sign which evokes thought of an object could be seen to activate a "metaphorical" thought. The idea of metaphor "postulates a ground of similarity without stating what that in fact is. And into this blank space aestheticians have been able to insert whatever the times or their own needs have dictated" (20). Making the term exclusive or elucidatory in relation to concrete poetry necessitates a distinction between iconic and

symbolic semantics which seems impossible to define. As Steiner notes, in general this compelled a "flight away from metaphor toward image and diagram" as logical theoretical terms (ibid.). Similarly, the value of Peirce's semiotics to concrete poetry studies is largely in providing a clear vocabulary for describing its habitual use of imagistic or diagrammatic signification.

Solt's difficulty in scientifically certifying classical concrete poetry's semiotic value demonstrates a broader difficulty in describing and proving how it could positively synthesise or affect broader cultural discourse. We might postulate that, whereas Weaver's expressionist-constructivist distinction generated creative breathing space within classical aesthetics, by reincorporating subjective gesture, the semiotic approach represented a more dogged adherence to the movement's foundational aim of objective social function, which were ultimately to remain unfulfilled.

This failure can be seen as one reason for the gradual migration of many concrete poets – including Gomringer and the Noigandres – away from strict classical principles during the late 1950s-late 1960s, even as that style continued to attract new adherents: and for the more sudden dissolution of the concrete movement, whose validity depended to some extent on its promises of socio-cultural efficacy, by around 1968. Of the former, Stephen Scobie states:

> [T]he best date for its demise is, ironically, 1967-8, the year of its apparent triumph, with the publication of the three major anthologies.…The very definitiveness of these collections 'froze' concrete poetry in its historical moment. In the 1970s, most of the major practitioners either ceased writing, or else (as, notably, in the case of Ian Hamilton Finlay in Scotland and bpNichol in Canada) developed highly personal, post-concrete styles, too diverse to be meaningfully classified under the same heading. (*Earthquakes and Explorations* 146)

Scobie cites Bann's epitaph to the movement in "Ian Hamilton Finlay: An Imaginary Portrait", produced for the 1977 Finlay exhibition at London's Serpentine Gallery:

> In retrospect, the entire development of the phenomenon … can be seen to have perpetuated a strange illusion … that concrete poetry was a novel artistic or poetic form, still in its primary stages, which would acquire its basic 'grammar' and then proceed to the task of large-scale achievement. Thus the concrete epic might be expected to succeed in due time, in the same way as Pound's *Cantos* or Williams' *Paterson* have been seen as the epics of imagism. In

> effect, it would be more realistic to stress the fact that, from the outset, concrete poetry could be characterised not as a beginning but as an ending (or at least the beginning of an ending) not as a grammar but as a mannerism. The concrete poets were completing a cycle of linguistic experimentation which had begun in the early days of the Modern Movement….They offered a 'mythic' resolution to the enterprise of fragmentation proclaimed by the Futurists and Dadaists. (10)

We might see this "mythic resolution" as the allegory of iconic semantics, ultimately unable to evolve from a mannerism into a grammar. Though Scobie cites Finlay's garden of sculptural and landscape poetry at Little Sparta as one candidate for the "concrete epic" (*Earthquakes* 213), "concreteness" in such work denotes a more mercurial process of perennial material reincarnation of language, in which the Noigandres' and Gomringer's inceptive desire for linguistic objectification is subsumed.

Other Concrete Poetry

This did not, however, prevent the term "concrete poetry" being used to define a diverse array of literary and artistic practices extending into the 1970s and beyond. Many of these practices are better defined by terms other than concrete poetry, or indeed poetry. However, within the broad mass of activity with which the term became associated, it is possible to isolate certain projects undertaken in knowledge of and response to the original tenets of concrete poetry, but which imbued it with an alternative set of principles, often in response to the blind spots inferable from the foregoing critical accounts: chiefly maximalism, spontaneity, an increased use of sound, and an emphasis on the form's multimedia possibilities. This work comprises a branch of concrete poetry whose aesthetic cohesiveness is often unacknowledged, perhaps because of its frequently chaotic outward stylistics. Its development merits exploration as the macrocosm of concrete poetry's development in England and Scotland, which influenced and was influenced by it, and which responded to similar influences and pressures.

The roots of this work are in an alternative set of early-twentieth-century precedents to those of classical concrete, which can thus be seen as broad, if not universal, influences on concrete poetry generally. Edwin Morgan connects the nurturing of wilder aesthetic tendencies within concrete – specifically in France – to "a fall back on concrete's secondary sources in Dada and Futurism" ("Into the

Constellation" 25). In fact, a larger proportion of early-twentieth-century art which emphasised language's material dimensions was wedded to Dadaist or Futurist ideals of ambiguity, freedom and excess – presaging this other concrete poetry – than to classical notions of immutability and restraint: perhaps because most of that work takes its cue from those pioneering genres, and from Apollinaire's comparable exemplars of visual verse.

That genealogical claim must be backed up of course, as the breadth of that early-twentieth-century corpus might seem to preclude generalisation regarding its origins. It encompasses, after all, Russian and European literary avant-gardes – including the Dadaists, Futurists, Constructivists, Ultraists, Vorticists and Imagists – individual writers from myriad traditions – Apollinaire and Mallarmé; Pound, Stein, Cummings and Joyce – painters and collagists whose work incorporated text – Cubists such as Picasso and Braque; Dadaists like Schwitters and Hausmann – and those who developed visual pseudo-grammars, notably Kandinsky and Klee.

Nonetheless, as regards visualised language – putting aside visual artists – Willard Bohn describes Apollinaire and the Italian Futurists as "the source of all subsequent experiments … during this period".[16] Accepting Mallarmé as an isolated precedent, he notes the Futurists' spring 1914 trip to Paris as the inspiration for Apollinaire's first "figurative poem", "Lettre-Océan", and Carlo Carrà's co-invention of the "word-painting" (*The Aesthetics of Visual Poetry* 9). Bohn adds that Apollinaire's experiments with syntax re-creating visual appearance extend "at least as far back as "Zone" (1912) when he "began to imitate the Cubist painters who decomposed an object into its parts, seen from different angles, and regrouped them in two-dimensional patterns (simultanism)", although these poems are visually conventional (17-18).[17] Italian Futurist poetry had been foregrounding visual effects at least as far back as the conception of "parole in libertà" in Marinetti's "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature" (1912), and arguably since his first manifesto of 1909, most iconically in "Zang Tumb Tumb" (1912-14). Bohn notes that before 1914, "most of the typographical effects are not pictorially oriented, but concerned with sounds and/or relationships", although such work could still be called visual poetry (*Aesthetics of Visual Poetry* 16).

As regards sonic language, a 1978 historical survey by Steve McCaffery backdates sound poetry's "second phase" – following the "vast, intractable area of

archaic and primitive poetries" – to 1875. But he cites only "isolated pioneering attempts", by Christian Morgenstern and others, prior to "the Russian Futurists Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh, the intermedia activities of Kandinsky, the bruitist poems of the Dadaists … and the 'paroles in liberta' of the Italian Futurist Marinetti" ("Sound Poetry: A Survey"). Bracketing Kandinsky, an important period here is 1912-13, during which Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh wrote *The Word as Such*, and Marinetti published his "Technical Manifesto". The conception of Dadaist sound poetry can be credited to the first Cabaret Voltaire performances of 1916; speaking generally, Hans Richter noted Dada to have "swallowed Futurism – bones, feathers and all", acknowledging the circumscription of certain principles of this new form by the earlier style (33).[18]

Poets seeking to transform classical style could thus turn to a raft of predefined possibilities of visual or sonic poesis: not only by falling back onto Dadaism and Futurism, but because that work, and Apollinaire's, fundamentally influenced the qualities with which the notion of materialised language was generally imbued in the early twentieth century. To define some such qualities, I appropriate some of the principles ascribed to early-twentieth-century visual literature, primarily Russian, French and Italian, in Johanna Drucker's *The Visible Word* (1994).

The key impetus, Drucker notes, was the presentation of that literature in opposition to various dominant cultural or artistic discourses – including tropes associable with romanticism, high art and mass media – and thus as the basis for revolutionary modes of social being:

> We can understand typographic experiment as a modern art practice which participated in many of the same operations as literature and art: the blurring of lines between high and low (so called) cultural practices, the challenge to the romantic subject, the assertion that the transformation of symbolic systems was a politically significant act, and the proposition that a new aesthetic form would bring about, construct, envision, a new utopian vision of the world. (11)

At a surface level, this involved visual or sonic presentation which undermined or exploded conventional semantic sense – taken as a talisman of those dominant discourses – rather than enhancing or augmenting it. This is key, because whilst many of the qualities Drucker cites might be ascribed to classical style, it derived its outward identity partly in contradistinction to the chaotic, aggressive and spontaneous expressive qualities with which they became associable, particularly in Dadaism and Futurism,

which essentially implied such pressure on semantics. In some cases, most obviously Finlay's, this distaste melded with a suspicion of underpinning ethical and political imperatives. Either way, by re-embracing messier outward stylistics, non-classical concrete poets could manifest those principles in what seemed a striking reappraisal of repressed possibilities, even if in retrospect, that reappraisal seems more wedded to its enabling cultural context than the style it supplanted.

It is tempting to interpret this stylistic shift as a synthesis of concrete poetics with the 1960s North American conception of the "intermedia", or the related aesthetic-sociological ideals of the Western counter-culture. This link is valid – and clarified in my final chapter – but does not quite acknowledge the geographical and chronological breadth of the shift, which can be sensed in independent developments in various countries throughout the 1950s-70s. Even by 1959, the Brazilian poet Ferreira Gullar had written a "Neo-Concrete Manifesto" reacting against the principles of rationalism and abstract functionality ascribed to various concrete artists, almost certainly implicating the Noigandres. By the late 1960s, French poets such as Julien Blaine and Jean-François Bory had turned, as Morgan notes, to "collage, photomontage, fragments of newsprint, and roughly written words and letters": "far more expressionistic data than constructivist-minded critics would allow" ("Into the Constellation" 25). In Canada around the same time, Steve McCaffery, bpNichol and others began producing what was christened "dirty" concrete poetry – by Scobie according to McCaffery, though Scobie credits Nichol (*Earthquakes* 66) – to distinguish it from "clean" classical style. In his response to a 1996 questionnaire regarding the "poetics of concretisim", McCaffery described "Dirty" concrete as involving:

> [A] preference for textual obliteration rather than manifestation, and the use of found objects as notation for sound performance. [It] describes the productions of the majority of Concrete in Canada (the mimeographic overprinting of bill bissett, my own and Nichol's investigations into Xerox disintegrations).…I believe Scobie's schema can be amplified somewhat to include a different tendency towards openness and closure. It was the closure of the text, its reified condition as object, framed and/or paginated that was frontally engaged in Canada by the performed sound poem and its attendant cabaret sociology. The creative propulsion too was more emotive than rational. ("Steve McCaffery" 400)

These developments, McCaffery notes, were influenced by Cobbing and London-based poets, and by a "spirit of contestation with canonic Concrete": "[b]y the early 70s the feeling had arisen that concretism had become overly precious and inordinately narrow in its range; that it had ossified into a school at the very moment it seemed to be opening up tremendous new territory" (401).

Rather than tracking every instance where these principles manifested themselves, it is more pertinent to note that they represented instinctively graspable possibilities of materialised language during the 1950s-70s: not necessarily because of a common connection to intermedia art or the counter-culture, or because they comprised self-evident means of opposing classical principles, but because of those palpable early-twentieth-century precedents. This can be ascertained by noting their premonition in a version of "concrete poetry" forged in isolation from the paradigms of classical concrete, intermedia and the counter-culture, in Sweden in the early 1950s.[19]

Öyvind Fahlström first described his work as "concrete poetry" in the 1954 manifesto "Hipy Papy Bthuthdth Thuthda Bthuthdy".[20] As Amelie Björck notes, Fahlström worked in isolation from the concrete movement until the early 1960s, having "no direct impact" on concrete's "international development" (317). His work was unknown to English and Scottish poets until its publication in Solt's anthology (1968).[21] It is significant not as a prototype for the reappraisal of concrete aesthetics, but in proving that that process embraced elementary possibilities of the genre largely eschewed in classical concrete: certainly by its poetics. I will highlight three, leaning on the first chapter of Bessa's *Öyvind Fahlström*, which contrasts Fahlström's concrete poetry with Gomringer and the Noigandres' "Bauhausian-constructivist" model, and highlighting overlaps with English-Scottish poetry (3).

The first is an emphasis on sound, indicated by the clearer reference to "musique concrète" in Fahlström's use of the term "concrete". Although, like his poetry, that 1954 manifesto contains visual and architectural allusions, Fahlström asserts that "[t]he fundamental principle of concrete poetry can perhaps be illustrated by Pierre Schaeffer's key experiment in his search for concrete music" ("Hipy Papy" 142). The manifesto also cites pointillist music, suggesting attention to Berio or Boulez (138), while Bessa suggests an influence from Stockhausen (*ÖF* 14). Fahlström envisages various methods for sonic arrangement of the concrete poem, involving rhythm, permutation and homophone, drawn together under the tactile term "kneading":

"KNEAD the material of language: that is what will justify a label such as 'concrete' " ("Hipy Papy" 142). Bessa's reading of Fahlström's grid poem "MOA (1)" reveals some of these principles at work.

This sonic predisposition mirrors the broader use of sound-patterning by many concrete poets, in performance or transcription, as the most intuitive correlate to spatial positioning in the arrangement of linguistic units, given the absence of linear syntax fundamental to concrete style: in classical works of the de Camposes as much as performance works by McCaffery. But the defining statements of classical poetics sideline concrete's sonic possibilities. Compare Fahlström's engrossment with sound to the "Pilot Plan's" bracketed reference to "(Webern and his followers: Boulez and Stockhausen; concrete and electronic music)", in a brief, sweeping paragraph quickly turning to concrete art (72). As Bessa notes, the Noigandres' "reliance on architectural metaphors, as opposed to Fahlström's openly aural approach, points to an essential dichotomy that pervades the concrete poetry movement as a whole: writing versus sound (or speech), text versus performance" (*ÖF* 6). The classical eschewal of sound perhaps reflects the greater ability of visual expression to affect objectivity, primarily because visual poems – even those constructed from unprecedented semiotic systems – could be re-encountered in apparently the same form after composition. Contrastingly, sound works would be lost along with the spatiotemporal moment of composition – sometimes also a performance – unless their exact characteristics were remembered and repeated, recordings not generally being considered "the poem" in the way a text is.

But sound-effects were central to concrete poetry's English-Scottish reception, showing the parallels between that reception and the broader revision of concrete aesthetics in question. These effects ranged from Cobbing's decontextualised, non-linguistic vocal textures to the neat phonetic modulations of Finlay's Noigandres-inspired early-1960s poems; to sounds rendering the auditory dimensions of specific social environments, as in the hyper-naturalistic dialect poetry of Leonard or Morgan.

A second notable characteristic is Fahlström's use of concrete grammar to multiply and undermine semantic meaning, as well as stabilise it. This impulse is evident in his manifesto's endorsement of wordplay, particularly homonym – "if I hear firing, I am not sure whether someone has been shot, burned, or dismissed. Figs are related to figment, pigs to pigmentation" – and of "what might conventionally be seen as the arbitrary attribution of new meanings to letters, word, sentences or paragraphs" (140). It

is also clear from Bessa's reading of Fahlström's 1966 collection *Bord*, which posits a general principle of multiplying and balancing potential codes of linguistic value, such that a poem's meaning is never rendered univocal. The principle is evident even in its title: both the Swedish word for "table", and "a composite of the words *bökstaver* (letter) and *ord* (word)" (*ÖF* 135).[22] This paradigm holds concrete poetry's will towards concretised meaning in tension with a drive towards abstraction and dispersal.

That Bessa calls the poetry of *Bord* "a kind of dirty concretism" reflects the parallels here with the broader dichotomy posited by McCaffery (*ÖF* 38). Similarly though, semantic ambiguity and diffuseness were largely countered by classical poetics, which tended to associate them with obscurantism and egotism, or a facile pre-occupation with visuality:

> I see danger in taking away from Concrete Poetry its useful, aesthetic-communicative character on the one side by not understanding the simpler linguistic phenomena (by being over-fed with words, and by lack of artistic sensibility) and on the other side by following the new esoteric of the typographic poets in whom one can sometimes notice a certain lack of imagination. (Gomringer "The Poem as Functional Object" 70)

Again, the semantic ambiguity presaged by Fahlström's work became particularly important to English and Scottish concretists: although Finlay's movement away from concrete poetry was motivated by concerns similar to Gomringer's. It is most obvious in Cobbing's literally "dirty" looking duplicator prints, in which overlaid text generates multiple possible reading routes, but any concrete poem incorporating ambiguous or openly idiomatic language – such as Morgan's "Pomander", with its loose play of associations – more subtly enacts a similar principle.

A third, related emphasis of Fahlström's work is upon language's existence prior to its use in a given poem, as is clear from his manifesto's citation of Schaeffer's collage technique as an analogy for concrete poetry's "fundamental principle":

> [H]e had on tape a few seconds of railway engine noise but was not content just to follow that noise with another.…Instead he cut out a fragment with slightly altered pitch; then went back to the first, then the second, and so on, to give an alternation. Only then had he actually created; he had performed an operation on the material itself by cutting it up: the elements were not new, but from this newly formed context new matter emerged. (142)

The interest comes across in Fahlström's love of homonym and portmanteau: the attachment of unwieldy chains of etymological association to signs which might otherwise be associated solely with a current referent, as if newly minted for that purpose.

Bessa takes this tendency to indicate another general divide within concrete poetry, framed by recourse to Derrida's reformulation of Lévi-Strauss's distinction between the "engineer" and the "bricoleur". The original distinction is between the scientific mind, which performs a given task using "tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project", and the savage mind, which "make[s] do with 'whatever is at hand', … a set of tools and materials which … bears no relation to the current project" (Lévi-Strauss 17). Applied to literature this would distinguish the writer who engineers new signs to precisely relay her or his concepts from the writer who uses a bricolage of existing ones, sacrificing that precision. In *Writing and Difference*, Derrida contends that the structures of language always precede and prefigure meaning, thus "every discourse is bricoleur", "the engineer is a myth" (360); Bann makes a similar point in "Ian Hamilton Finlay: Engineer and Bricoleur" (1970), describing the distinction between the two roles as essentially "a difference in attitude" (2). Accordingly, Bessa distinguishes between concrete poetry which obfuscates its status as "bricolage", implying total aptitude to current purpose, and that which acknowledges it; the latter quality in Fahlström's work overlaps with his "dirty" admission of semantic ambiguity. Once again, Bessa finds the former tendency in ascendance in classical poetics: the "central question" in comparing it with Fahlström's, he states, is "whether the term "concrete" must be read as the "product of a critical evolution of forms," as the Noigandres manifesto declares, or in the sense articulated by Lévi-Strauss … as the modus operandi of 'primitive minds' " (*ÖF* 3).

Once more, the latter principle is particularly relevant to English and Scottish concrete poets. However, we can attribute various motives to their re-admissions of context, from a sense that the affectation of contextless language represented an insidious ideological threat, to a desire to re-imbue the concrete poem with personal associations of beauty and belonging. The former motive can be attributed to some of the "found poetry" created by Morgan, Cobbing, Finch and others from the mid-1960s, the latter to Finlay's pristine 1960s pseudo-letter poems, created from strings of Scottish port codes.[23]

In framing the reception of concrete poetry in England and Scotland, therefore, we cannot simply invoke its classical origins: despite their universal significance. Putting aside the specifically Scottish agendas it came to serve, that reception both mirrored this worldwide shift from classical to non-classical principles, and stood in a relationship of mutual affect with it, as revealed by the incremental movement away from concrete poetry's original tenets across the work of Finlay, Morgan, Houédard, and Cobbing. As such, other influences, broad although not universal, must be acknowledged: not only the early-twentieth-century aesthetics which prefigured classical style itself, but those which inspired its eventual subversion, and the contemporaneous work which embodied that process.

The foregoing presentation of that subversion should not, however, be taken as a tacit endorsement of its poetics over those of classical style. It is fairer to note that both were equally concerned with securing the integrity and accuracy of language for progressive social ends, and equally liable to lapses into mythological or metaphysical accounts of the process by which their own poetic method secured that integrity: as the remainder of this study should confirm.

## The British-Irish context

A similar spirit of reappraisal should also lead us to consider the less tangible influence upon English-Scottish concrete of the tradition of visually and sonically pre-occupied art in the British Isles prior to May 1962. In general, English-Scottish concrete poetry stands curiously outside that native tradition, a concept imported almost conspicuously from other parts of the world: partly to counter contemporaneous national literary milieus seen as stiflingly introspective: the Scottish Renaissance, the Movement. But many concrete poets might have responded to it as an ambient context, and in many cases, aesthetic affinities can be convincingly posited.

We might, for example, trace a thread of stylistic development back to the typographic exploits of the Vorticists, preserved in the two issues of *Blast*. Certainly, Vorticism's "cool classicism" (Adams 14), influenced by Hulme's aesthetics, seems a more intuitive antecedent to English and Scottish poets' reception of classical concrete ideals of clarity and restraint than the spontaneous, expressionistic gestures of Futurism, to which Lewis and others were responding. In a different vein, one might consider

English-Scottish concrete poetry an inheritance of the conception of language as a crafted object from the cottage industries of Eric Gill or William Morris. Jerome McGann's influential reading of Morris's Kelmscott Press editions as "the forebears not merely of early modernist procedures like imagism, vorticism, and objectivism, but of important later developments in visual and concrete poetry", makes this inference especially tempting (69). In the shorter term, one might view concrete poetry in light of the reception of first-generation avant-garde thought, including the tenets of sound and visual poetry, through the Gaberbocchus Press, operated in London by the Polish emigres Stefan and Franciszka Themerson. Stefan Themerson's own novels, notably *Bayamus* (1949), and the "semantic poems" embedded in them, some of which experiment with visual form, have been taken as precedents to concrete style, notably by Houédard.

Perhaps most convincingly, one might look to Edward Wright, whose practice as a typographer, poet and painter in the 1950s-60s presages concrete in several respects. We might cite, for example, his various architectural lettering projects, notably for Alison and Peter Smithson's "House of the Future" display at the 1956 Ideal Home exhibition, and for Theo Crosby's construction at the 1961 International Union of Architects' Congress (Kinross 7).[24] We might also highlight his 1950s experimental typographical collaborations with students at the LCC Central School of Arts and Crafts, including Germano Facetti, future Penguin book designer and interior stylist of Better Books. These collaborations are assessed in the anonymous 1954 *Typographica* article "Pattern, Sound, and Motion", and printed in Cobbing and Mayer's *Concerning Concrete Poetry* as evidence that Wright was "making what are obviously concrete poems well before 1955" (54). According to Michael Harrison, the classes out of which this work emerged "encouraged students to use letters freed for a while from their function as mere components of words, each with their particular meaning, but instead as elements of structure and movement (later on as sound and image)" (24). Crosby asserts that the workshops "produced what is now called concrete poetry" (31). A more practical connection can also be posited in this case, given Wright's lettering designs for poems such as Finlay's *4 Sails* (1966), and his brief tenure as typographical editor for Houédard and Furnival's press Openings, after his meeting with Furnival at Between Poetry and Painting; although that collaboration ended swiftly, Furnival states, "because

of distance, but also, I suspect, because we weren't really up to scratch typographically" (letter to the author, May 18, 2012).

Besides geographically specific precedents, we can also posit various theoretical contexts for the English-Scottish reception of concrete less relevant to its initial formulation, because they occurred subsequently to or alongside it. These include the ideas of aural and visual culture, and "hot" and "cold" media, expounded in McLuhan's *Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and *Understanding Media* (1964): writing specifically about "Scottish Poetry in the Sixties", David Black notes that "for a time" McLuhan's "obscure and exuberant theories about media were immensely influential" (91). We might also cite the radical emphasis on the contingency of reality to language in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), particularly influential upon Houédard's conception of negative expression; and whose oddly childlike analogies of apples and colours perhaps influenced Finlay's 1960s publications, one of which is named *The Blue and the Brown Poems* (1968) after its preparatory sketches.[25] Inversely, some inflections of classical poetics seem less vital to concrete poetry's English-Scottish incarnation, perhaps primarily the earnest engagement with cybernetics and information theory as models for poetic composition by figures such as Max Bense.

Little else can be stated to collectively characterise concrete poetry in England and Scotland. However, we might finally draw attention to a technological development which greatly aided its dissemination in printed form there as elsewhere: the advent of offset lithography, a cheap and viable method of little magazine and press printing facilitating unprecedented visual adventurousness on the linguistic page. Offset lithography, Carl Dair explains:

> [S]tarts as a photographic process in which either a very light impression is produced by inked metal type and then photographed, or actual film images of letters are produced by photo-typesetting machines. The images are 'burned' into a metal plate, which, when inked, transfers them to a rubber blanket by which they are in turn *laid on* the sheet of paper, rather than impressed into it. (37)

Printing thus essentially became a form of photography, allowing language to be displayed in any form which that method allowed. The obvious advantages of this to a literary style as visually preoccupied as concrete poetry hardly need to be spelled out.

This then, is the broad context against which the following bodies of work are

defined. But it is important to emphasise, finally, that those bodies of work cannot be envisaged as points along a unilinear spectrum, signposted at one end with the term "classical", at the other with a word like "dirty". These are also four oeuvres defined by highly individual influences and drives unaccountable for by recourse to overarching rubrics. Avoiding further generalisation then, let us turn to specifics.

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[1] Information on signatories is from "Paradada". Even by this stage, however, divisions had arisen. Hollo, for example, expresses wariness regarding concrete poetry's potentially depoliticising emphasis on purity: "THE DANGER: a regressive search for sanctuary – non-commitment, refuge, in the making of amulets, silly little charms to ward off the Evil Eye. Only, that Eye don't even notice". Referring to Finlay and Houédard, he added "if only they wouldn't stop at the amulet stage" ("Note on 'Concrete' Poetry"). Finlay would refer bitterly to Hollo's derision of his poems as "silly little" (in his letter to Mike Weaver, for example), a description which partly explains the briefness of Hollo's own "concrete phase"

[2] The term "classical", for which equivalents such as "classic", "heroic" and "orthodox" are sometimes used, is taken from Charles Perrone's *Seven Faces*: *Brazilian Poetry Since Modernism*, though various authors use it. Perrone uses the term to describe Brazilian concrete poetry produced from 1956-60, before "more flexible" notions of creativity were introduced (26). However, it also usefully suggests the principles of clarity, restraint and precision attendant to concrete poetry in the broader context which I identify.

[3] Pre-twentieth-century work is excluded from similar consideration. This decision is partly pragmatic, reflecting the unfathomable vastness and presumably fractional excavation of that field, although various distinct historical contexts for Western visual poetry in particular can be identified, notably Hellenic Greece, the Carolingian Empire, and Western Europe from the early sixteenth to mid-seventeenth century. It also seems evident, both from concrete poems themselves and from the context of their composition, that they largely represent a response to developments in art and literature following Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés* (1897). In the first case, the aesthetic, ethical and political imperatives of concrete poetry and poetics are generally unrelated to the religious and ceremonial poems gathered in Higgins's *Pattern Poetry*, for example. In the second case, I lean on Higgins's assertion that after "pattern poetry and knowledge of its traditions gradually disappeared in the eighteenth and nineteenth century", visual poets of Mallarmé's epoch – which I take to encompass the concrete era – worked "without any deep knowledge of the earlier works", "starting, as it were, from a blank page" (*Pattern Poetry* 17). However, the influence of pre-twentieth-century work upon individual concrete poets, especially in London and the West Country, is inarguable, and cited where relevant. Relevant surveys and anthologies besides those discussed include Jeremy Adler's "Technopaigneia, Carmina Figurata and Bilder-Reime" (1982), and Mayer's "Framed and Shaped Writing" (1968) and "Some Remarks Concerning the Classification of the Visual in Literature" (1983); the latter attempt trans-historical taxonomies of visual poetic forms. Mayer's *Alphabetical and Letter Poems: A Crestomathy* (1978) contains many historical exemplars.

[4] See Perloff, "'Concrete Prose' in the Nineties: Haroldo de Campos's 'Galáxias' and After".
[5] This chapter of Bessa's *Öyvind Fahlström* is based on his 1998 article "Architecture Versus Sound in Concrete Poetry".
[6] See Bessa's "Sound as Subject: Augusto de Campos's Poetamenos" (2009).
[7] Also see Albers's *The Interaction of Colour* (1963).
[8] Albers himself composed poems, many of which mirror classical concrete in spirit if not style:

> To design is
> to plan and organize,
> to order, to relate
> and to control
>
> In short it embraces
> all means opposing
> disorder and accident
>
> Therefore it signifies
> a human need
> and qualifies man's
> thinking and doing ("To Design")

[9] The psychologist C.E. Osgood attempted to map objective connotations onto certain words.
[10] See Claus Clüver's "The Noigandres Poets and Concrete Art".
[11] The "Pilot Plan" also references film (Eistenstein), serialist music (Webern), and cybernetics. The first two seem more peripherally related to their poetry, especially the musical element, largely sidelined in the 1950s. The third connection is discussed via cross-comparison in my chapters on Morgan and Houédard. In "Writing as Re-Writing: Concrete Poetry as Arrière-Garde" (2007) Perloff reappraises concrete poetry after her relatively sceptical treatment of it in *Radical Artifice* partly by distinguishing the Noigandres from Gomringer on the basis of this Joycean verbal invention. Perloff associates Gomringer's relative lack of invention with an unfamiliarity with the visual linguistic projects of the early twentieth century, and thus a sense that his visualisation of language was a sufficiently novel gesture.
[12] Haroldo first made contact with Max Bense in 1959 during a visit to Germany, subsequently becoming a visiting lecturer at Stuttgart (Walther-Bense 353).
[13] The concept is satirised in Finlay and Furnival's "Semi-Idiotic Poems", supplements to *POTH* 13, in which pseudo-abstract symbols are granted homely or bawdy figurative associations by lexical keys. Furnival's upwards and downwards triangles, by reference to ancient symbols for genitalia and scots balladry, become "laddie" and "lassie", interpenetrating furiously against a series of square frames labelled "rye".
[14] Debate regarding the level of "expressionism" permitted to the classical concrete poet is epitomised by Rosemarie Waldrop's criticism of Solt's assertion, in her anthology introduction, that "all definitions of concrete poetry can be reduced to the same formula: form=content/content=form" (13). Waldrop saw the latter half of this equation as reconditely re-authorising subjectively governed composition, rendering the

description "concrete" obsolete: "[s]tructure is contents.…This is not, Mary Ellen Solt to the contrary, a reversible statement. It is the clear opposite of the Romantic notion of organic form where content is structure, i.e., where content determines the structure, the form.…The emphasis is formalist rather than expressive" (316).

[15] Other semiotically inflected studies of concrete include Haroldo's "The Informational Temperature of the Text" and Eric Vos's "The Visual Turn in Poetry". Solt's essay is printed in *OEI* 51 (2010), a special issue of the Swedish journal dedicated to her poetry and theory.

[16] Of course, dismissing visual art in this way belies the use of collage and simultaneity in early-twentieth-century visual and sonic poetry in response to the fracturing of the visual plane and incorporation of found materials in Cubist painting. Both Steiner, and Scobie in *Earthquakes and Explorations,* trace a stylistic lineage from cubism to concrete. Bohn's *Apollinaire and the International Avant-Garde* (1997) deals with Apollinaire's literary legacy, notably in Catalonia and America.

[17] Describing the shift from simultanist poem to calligramme in the same text, Bohn notes the influence of Blaise Cendrars and Sonia Delaunay, perhaps referring to Cendrars's 1913 concertina-booklet poem *La Prose du Trans-Sibérien at de la Petite Jehanne de France*, illustrated by Delauney (*Aesthetics of Visual Poetry* 64-68), which Perloff takes as an exemplar of the futurist spirit in the first chapter of *The Futurist Moment.*

[18] For a detailed survey of Russian Futurist sound poetry see Gerald Janacek, *Zaum: The Transrational Poetry of Russian Futurism* (1996). In *The Futurist Moment* Perloff assesses various contemporaneous international developments in terms of a binding futurist spirit.

[19] In stepping from the early twentieth century to the 1950s, we should not overlook the continued practice, albeit less widespread, of visual and sonic language relevant to "other concrete" in the intervening decades, chiefly emerging from French surrealism. Take the Lettrist movement inaugurated by Isodore Isou in the mid-1940s, which utilised the rebus principle of ancient proto-phonetic languages – see Bohn's chapter in *Modern Visual Poetry* (2000) – and figures such as Henri Michaux and André Masson. For a brief chronological overview of visual language in the twentieth century see Drucker, "Experimental, Visual, and Concrete Poetry: A Note on Historical Context and Basic Concepts" (1996).

[20] Fahlström's use of the term was thus initially as isolated from the concrete movement's as, for example, Pierre Schaeffer's definition of "musique concrète". Fahlström's work might thus be seen to lie outside my own definition of concrete, but other facts suggest retrospective orientation in response to classical style. Notably, in the early 1960s, Fahlström published work by Gomringer, Heißenbuttel and Franz Mon in the journal *Rondo* (Björck 318), subsequently subtitling that 1954 statement "Manifesto for Concrete Poetry" in his 1966 collection *Bord,* composed 1952-55 (Bessa *ÖF* 5). Following Bessa's *Öyvind Fahlström* (2008), many critics have brought Fahlström's work under the aegis of concrete, notably Perloff in *Unoriginal Genius* (2010).

[21] Solt's anthology was initially published as an issue of *Artes Hispanicas/Hispanic Arts: Revista de Literatura Musica y Artes Visuales/ A Magazine of Literature Music and Visual Arts* (Winter-Spring 1968), republished by Indiana University Press in 1970 (Solt "Conrete Steps to an Anthology" 350-51). Morgan, Finlay and Houédard all feature in it, and they and Cobbing would probably all have read the 1968 version.

[22] Bessa also cites, via Derrida, some etymological overlaps with words denoting ships' decks and geographical borders (32).

[23] For examples of the former, see Malcolm Parr's 1972 anthology *Found Poems*, and the sixth issue of Zurbrugg's *Stereo Headphones* (1974), dedicated to "the treated text". Bann discusses the interplay of engineering and bricolage in Finlay's work in "Ian Hamilton Finlay: Engineer and Bricoleur" (1970).

[24] See Gerald Woods, Philip Thomson and John Williams's *Art Without Boundaries: 1950-70* for images of Wright's lettering project for Crosby (196).

[25] See Perloff's "From 'Suprematism' to Language Game: *The Blue and Brown Poems* of Ian Hamilton Finlay".

Order and Doubt: Ian Hamilton Finlay

Ian Hamilton Finlay was the first publisher of concrete poetry in England or Scotland, featuring the Brazilian poets Augusto de Campos, Pedro Xisto and Marcelo Moura in the sixth issue of *POTH* in March 1963, around nine months after Morgan had introduced him to the style. His first concrete poetry collection *Rapel* appeared shortly afterwards, his own experiments with the genre having begun in winter 1962, making him the first published concrete poet in the UK. However, within roughly six years, he was decisively detaching himself from the style, in apparent dismay at its increasing association with artistic and cultural projects anathema to his concerns – one aspect of the shift outlined in the last chapter – and because the interaction of linguistic and material elements in his own work was developing beyond the terms of concrete poetry as he had interpreted it. The significance of this symbolic demarcation to criticism of Finlay's post-1962 oeuvre, and to this chapter's thematic scope, is considered shortly.

Broadly speaking, the work Finlay produced during this avowed period of engagement can be said to involve the realisation of thematic duality through works of formal duality. "Thematic duality" here denotes the generation of striking or unexpected cultural or aesthetic associations between objects or phenomena, sometimes drawn from the same "local" sensory environment, sometimes, as Stephen Bann states, forging "analogies between certain objects, and groups of objects, which belong to totally different contexts" ("Ian Hamilton Finlay: The Structure of a Poetic Universe" 78). Formal duality is that between the linguistic and material elements of a poem, the latter generally visual, but also often sonic or tactile in emphasis. Finlay's work had been incorporating illustrations since his first book of short stories was published in 1958, but only in 1962, via contact with the concrete movement, did his poetry's material aspects become truly fundamental to its thematic scope: although the precise nature of this relationship shifted throughout the period in question.

Finlay's use of duality of form to establish or enhance duality of theme seems the expression of a deep artistic need for moral and emotional consistency: to posit patterns between human and natural processes across different cultures, epochs and environments.

It was faithful to classical concrete poetics in its resultant concern with ordering and concentrating the values of signs by enhancing their material qualities in order to draw such connections. But the fact that these connections often bound together disparate contexts in this way, rather than remaining in the internally harmonious realms of single thematic discourses, connoted an acknowledgement of the possibility of ultimate orderlessness, and a sense of the concrete poem's symbolic integrations as acts of will, even violence, rather than formal logic, which distinguished Finlay from his forebears. As Anne Moeglin-Delcroix notes, "metaphor" in Finlay's work is not "a natural passage between contiguous realities via one of their aspects", but evokes "both the distance itself and the effort required to abolish it" (59). The avowed contingency of the moral and emotional order thus established generally conveyed itself in the 1960s through his work's brevity and frequent willful naivety of form and tone, rather than the overtly martial connotations of much subsequent work; and through the ulterior value which its material elements assumed even as they took on symbolic functions: to allude by their sheer, pre-symbolic presence to the conceptual recalcitrance of physical matter.

This somewhat overarching introduction might seem to lead us down the second of the "false tracks" of analysis against which Bann guards in his influential essay "Ian Hamilton Finlay: An Imaginary Portrait" (1977): the "quasi-anthropological" approach, whose "synchronic" assessment of Finlay's "poetic universe" belies the "dynamic transformations through which one type of language has passed into another" throughout his career, exacting "irreversible" alterations on its content and ethical scope (7). Bearing this in mind, this chapter also tracks the dynamic transformations in Finlay's formal grammar between 1962 and 1968, acknowledging both their irreversible alteration of his work's thematic parameters, and the subsistence of the principle just outlined; thereby avoiding Bann's other false track, the one-directional, teleological narrative of aesthetic development (7).[1]

These transformations in the relationship between formal and thematic duality also deserve attention because they eventually provided Finlay's route out of concrete style as he had interpreted it, already set apart from classical concrete by the "principle of conflict" just outlined (Bann "Imaginary Portrait" 11). The first of these transformations, inspired by the

Noigandres' emphasis of "graphic space as structural agent", led to an early-1960s preoccupation with language's visual dimensions, which complemented a thematic duality often primarily established through phonetic or grammatical patterning. Even at this stage, a "non-classical"– in the concrete sense – demarcation of the roles of language and material gesture was established, through the use of language's pictorial rather than nominally sub-semantic visual qualities. There followed a separation of semantic and visual or physical components of the poem, and a coextensive re-establishment of those mediums' conventional referential lexicons, which often granted a poem's material dimensions greater significance in establishing its theme, but also began to overrun concrete style as Finlay perceived it, by splitting up its visual-linguistic register. Both emphases were consolidated in the late 1960s by an exploration of the poem's inscription into sculptures and landscapes.

This argument largely reaffirms the scope of existing criticism regarding Finlay's movement through concrete poetry, still shaped to a considerable extent by critical accounts produced by Bann during the 1960s-70s, including close readings of pivotal works such as *Ocean Stripe 5*, and various summary essays prefixed with their subject's name, including "The Structure of a Poetic Universe" (1969) and "An Imaginary Portrait" (1977). Amongst other things, these works assessed Finlay's migration from pure concrete principles through the reintegration of overt symbolic values into the poem's material registers, and the related extrication of its various sensory and significatory channels, while acknowledging aesthetic and ethical continuities.

Perhaps one thing which this chapter establishes with new clarity is the extent to which Finlay's ultimate dissociation from concrete poetry was compelled by a sense of detachment from the social-cultural projects with which it was associated by the late 1960s, notwithstanding the primary significance of the indigenous stylistic evolution just outlined. For this and other reasons, its value is partly established over the course of the thesis as a whole, in the relationships thereby revealed between Finlay's work and the other oeuvres under consideration, a sense of which clarifies our understanding of both the terms of that detachment, and the singular distinctions of Finlay's work considered in its artistic and cultural moment. The general absence of such cross-comparative analysis within Finlay criticism – at least focused on concrete's English-Scottish reception – perhaps reflects

fidelity to his own delineation of his work from concrete poetry from the late 1960s onwards, and admonishments of developments within it by that time. The somewhat unequivocal adoption of these stances is exemplified by Yves Abrioux's assertion in *Ian Hamilton Finlay: A Visual Primer* – which quotes Finlay – that his " 'deliberate connection with [the] literary avant-garde' ceased when concrete poetry degenerated into a trite, decorative mode" (4, brackets in orig.). It connotes a tendency to assume that Finlay's admittedly exceptional contribution to concrete poetry represented, either entirely or to a large extent, the sum of the style's worthwhile development in England and Scotland, and to eschew consideration of it in that broader context. Putting aside Abrioux's somewhat injurious generalisation, comparing Finlay's concrete poetry with that of other English and Scottish poets ultimately brings its own unique aesthetic and ethical contours into sharper focus.

Notwithstanding concrete poetry's significance to Finlay's post-1962 oeuvre generally, both in retraining his attention on poetry's visual and physical possibilities, and in generating his characteristically sparse, often phonetically led syntax, I only actually consider as "concrete poetry" the work Finlay produced when he referred to himself as a concrete poet. This decision, which limits my focus to around 1962-69, is justified in two ways: firstly, it is practical, reflecting the fact that three other authors' work must be attended to, and that Finlay's post-1960s practice has been admirably documented elsewhere, notably in various books on his garden art, the major product of those later decades, including Jessie Sheeler's *Little Sparta* (2003) and John Dixon Hunt's *Nature Over Again* (2008). But it also reflects fidelity to Finlay's own precise sense of what "concrete poetry" was and was not, acknowledgement of which is necessary to the cross-comparative work which this project attempts. Were my own retrospective sense of what within Finlay's oeuvre constitutes "concrete poetry" to be overlaid onto his own, our sense of the term's diverse range of uses would be compromised, by obfuscating one significant and unique adaptation of it.

My opening theme is Finlay's 1950s short stories: the associations they draw between "native" landscapes and foreign literary tropes as evidence of a pre-existing impulse towards thematic duality, and of ekphrasis and visual metaphor as foretokens of the values ascribed to objects in concrete poetry. Turning to his first poetry collection *The*

*Dancers Inherit the Party* (1960), acknowledging connections to contemporaneous American poetry, I consider a different kind of thematic duality, involving the emotional congruence of poet and lover, and the formal congruence of objects within the same sensory environment. After assessing the extent of Finlay's connection to Edinburgh's late-1950s-early-1960s beat and folk scenes, I turn to his 1961 collection *Glasgow Beasts*, *An a Burd*. Inter-textual parallels and visual devices are acknowledged, but the collection is primarily assessed for its emphasis on language's auditory patterning, presaging the sonic stresses of his concrete work. After considering the 1962 booklet-poem *Concertina* as evidence of a burgeoning materially preoccupied sensibility not yet reconciled with his semantic impulse, and considering the influences upon Finlay's subsequent engagement with concrete poetry, I turn to his first concrete collection *Rapel* (1963): its use of phonetic and grammatical permutation to establish connections between objects and ideas, and a visual consolidation of those thematic dualities involving both pictorial and nominally non-figurative device. In Finlay's next text-bound collection *Telegrams from My Windmill* (1964), we find a re-establishment of the theme of love evoked in *The Dancers*, and the complementing of phonetic patterning through the visual interpenetration of words facilitated by typewriter composition. The card-poems which Finlay produced from 1963 onwards are taken to represent an extension of the visual and physical means by which a poem's thematic dualities could be enhanced, but also to inaugurate the separation of their linguistic and material registers. I then consider how Finlay's mid-1960s booklet-poems augmented poetry's extra-linguistic possibilities by utilising the symbolic potential of the physical and tactile aspects of reading, while his 1967 booklet-poem *Ocean Stripe 5* is taken to indicate a culmination of his demarcation of its linguistic and material dimensions. Both these concerns are shown to become more pronounced through Finlay's construction of poster-poems, glass poems, sculptural and landscape works across the 1960s, discussion of which precedes a closing analysis of his late-1960s break from concrete style.

The Short Stories

In 1947, Finlay's three-year period of non-combatant military service ended; from then until around 1956, he worked as a labourer and shepherd, mainly in Comrie, Perthshire. During this period he wrote plays and short stories, publishing some of the latter in *The Sea-Bed and Other Stories* (1958), and in the *Glasgow Herald*, the *Scottish Angler* – then edited by the poet Crombie Saunders – and various literary journals. These stories are generally extremely brief, structurally simple, often comic. Many transcribe moments of unstated aesthetic or moral revelation, displaying various stylistic qualities relevant to Finlay's concrete poetry: notably the location of the characteristics of one culture – often foreign – in another, generally a synthetic version of the author's rural Scottish one; and their apparent engrossment with the same small compendium of objects, of a mysterious spiritual import, which Finlay would continue rendering, often visually or sculpturally, throughout the 1960s. Despite the emphasis on revelation denoted by these characteristics however, an undertow of sadness sometimes consumes them.

Finlay generally applies his foreign aesthetic associations with a whimsical self-consciousness averting pretension, as when the bohemian protagonist of "Fisher by the Stove" – like many of Finlay's 1950s protagonists, probably a quasi-autobiographical construct[2] – is surprised in his cottage by "a little man clothed in black" with a "fishing-rod, and a khaki haversack" (20), who inspires several self-conscious pastoral fantasies:

> I thought of W.B. Yeats's peasant-fisherman, the grey Connemara man who went at dawn, alone, to drop his fly beside a dripping stone. Yeats said, in almost the next line, that he was 'but a dream'. My friend was no dream: and I thought of the two, the grey one from the squat cabin and the dark one from his Glasgow tenement, tall as a cliff. (22)

The directness with which the Yeatsian analogy is relayed, and the ironic reminder of the man's urban background, render the passage self-satirical, without defusing its essentially earnest intensity, generating the blended qualities of satire and pathos characteristic of the thematic links drawn in many of Finlay's concrete poems.

Often, points of aesthetic comparison are brought from further afield, as with the

influence of nineteenth-century Russian prose recalled in the 1962 poem "Lucky". Occasionally, this connection is established by similarly self-aware allusions, as when a "gay young tinker" in "The Potato Planters and the Old Joiner's Funeral" lashes his tractor with a "long, imaginary whip. Plainly, he was imagining himself to be a Cossack…." (39). More often, it is integrated at the level of theme and form. Finlay's portrayals of antagonistic rural power relations – between a trespassing fisherman and an inhumane groundskeeper in "Encounter"; a hermetic artist and a state welfare officer in "National Assistance Money" – are similar to those depicted between landowners and serfs in some of Turgenev's *Sketches from a Hunter's Album*: "Bailiff" or "Two Landowners", for example; Chekhov or Tolstoy could equally be invoked. The simplicity and brevity of plot typical of the nineteenth-century Russian short story is also analogous to Finlay's narrative architecture, generally built up around a single event or tableau.[3]

Such parallels – frequently drawn by Finlay in contemporaneous correspondence – also encompassed Scandinavians such as Strindberg and Munch, leading him to posit a trans-historical, pan-European "Northern" sensibility from which his own works were forged, based on interrelated qualities of topography, climate and character. In an undated letter to Derek Stanford (ca. 1950?)[4] he wrote:

> Northern Europe is a spiritual category quite other than S. Europe....There is an obvious affinity between such as Luther, Rembrandt, Kierkegaard, and so on, a precise note of feeling which is struck again and again….Is it accidental that the Northern landscape has its own (protestant) mystique? Did the mountains and pines, the mists and the dim Northern light, determine the spiritual life of Northern Man, or did he graft onto them his own interior spirituality so that landscape merely seems a tangible extension of soul?

Like Finlay's connection to Brazilian and German concrete poetry, this self-forged allegiance reflects both an apparent need to feel part of a distinct literary fraternity, and his suspicion of "native" ones: writing to Hendry (ca. 1947-56), he contrasted the above categorisation with that of "our Gaelic North", about which "I care little", perhaps referencing MacDiarmid's conception of "Gaeldom" in "The Caledonian Antisyzygy and the Gaelic Idea" (1931-32). However, like that later connection, Finlay's "Northernism" – perhaps reprised in his unsettling 1970s explorations of Nazi iconography – is also based on

the apparent affinity of the appropriated aesthetic mode to his local environment: intended to replenish rather than efface it.

Obviously, Finlay's short stories lack an integrated visual dimension, although one missive to Hendry (ca. 1947-56) does suggest that they and a group of writers publicise the idea of a "Northern School", "within … which our stories should be read", by attaching "an emblem, say a fir tree, a linocut ... to the front of every MSS [sic.] we sent off", an idea which presages the Wild Hawthorn Press both in its northern arboreal emblem and its emphasis on directing engagement with writing through graphic gesture. Moreover, during the 1940s-50s Finlay was also a painter, attending Glasgow School of Art in the 1940s before his expulsion for organising a "student revolt", according to Stanford, after which he returned "to help the janitor and sweep up the floor" (113). Finlay destroyed his paintings in the late 1950s, but correspondence with Stanford hints at their aesthetic orientation. One letter (ca. 1947-56) exalts Vermeer and Dürer's work, "factual" in depiction yet "utterly religious in essence". This emphasis on technical precision as liberating rather than restraining the spirit of the subject-matter is typical of Finlay's mid-to-late-1960s "classical" reorientation – in the non-concrete sense – typifying the resurfacing of single ideals throughout his career; even by 1945, Stanford asserts, he had "professed himself a contemporary classicist", perhaps in opposition to that era's "Neo-Romantic" poetry (112). However, his letters also frequently reference figures such as Munch, suggesting a reliance on expressionistic impulses he would later reject or curb.

The stories themselves are flecked with ekphrastic passages: detailed descriptions of a small number of objects or scenes, of a seemingly self-evident yet unstated moral or emotional significance, which often solicit an intuition governing a story's subsequent theme and tone. Again, the influence of Russian literature seems clear, particularly Tolstoy, "not", as Finlay wrote to Robert Creeley in a different context (October 26, 1961), "when he is moralising, but when he does that amazing thing of presenting a moral statement as a physical sensation".[5] The value of these little objects or scenes, retroactively enhanced by their re-materialisation throughout Finlay's concrete phase, sometimes entails a pellucid symbolic quality, sometimes a more ambiguously resonant "object-hood".

In the first case, one image, that of a row of fishes on a string, reappears in several

pieces: as when the twelve-year-old protagonist of "The Blue-Coated Fishermen" is presented with a gift by one of the title characters, "a dozen little trout with shiny red spots which somehow made the boy think of wild strawberries. The fish were in good condition, fat and clean. The fisherman picked out six and began to thread them together on a length of string. They looked like coloured clothes pegs dangling on a line" (10). Two kinds of resonance can be ascribed to this image, both involving metaphor. Firstly, the object mirrors others within the protagonist's psychological purview – wild strawberries, clothes pegs – generating a sense of aesthetic continuity within the fictional world opened up to the reader. This reiteration of formal qualities between different levels of an environment – most importantly between the man-made and the natural – attributes common underlying qualities to disparate objects or events in a manner reminiscent of the third type of metaphor posited in Aristotle's "Poetics", the presentation of two things as "species" of the same "genus", thereby invoking a broad category of phenomena: "[m]etaphor is the application to one thing of a name belonging to another thing; the transference may be from the genus to the species, from the species to the genus, or from one species to another, or it may be a matter of analogy" (Aristotle 61).[6] Secondly, of course, fish are images of the New Testament – an association enhanced by the fisherman's act of Christian generosity – meaning that their resonance transcends the immediate narrative environment to appeal to a presumed collective knowledge of religious values encapsulated in visual symbols. The dying lamb in "Midsummer Weather", and the crosses with which the father in "Straw" marks newspaper adverts for country estates, are similarly replete. Through both means, these objects become talismans of the moral and aesthetic order which Finlay would continue to invoke throughout the 1960s, often by making rather than describing such objects; one of his best-known toys is a row of coloured wooden fish on string.[7]

However, many of the stories' transcribed images seductively repel such conceptual quantification, most strikingly the "great cod" in "The Sea-Bed". The definite article used to introduce this animal suggests some uncommon, singular quality, but also that it had implanted itself in the scene's psychological fabric before its first narrative reference, shifting it beyond the conceptual mastery of both protagonist and author: "one of the boys felt that his skin no longer fitted him. His heart stopped beating for a second as he watched

the great cod" (2-3). The boy's subsequent encounter with the animal unfolds as a visceral disturbance, involving "sensations that in his twelve years of life, in a fishing family, in a small town he had not hitherto experienced. He tried to sort them out methodically,…he tried to turn the sensations into thoughts" (4). Such descriptions engage a sphere of material phenomena impervious to human invocations of order, the morally oblivious universe stirring beneath the foundations of subjective reality, potentially uprooting it: in Lacanian terms they are intimations of the Real, though the Finlayan term would be the Sublime: "it seems to be about my breakdown, long before I knew the experience", Finlay later remarked of the story to Hendry (1959-60?).[8] This same sense of the psychologically impalpable qualities of material things counterbalances their culturally allusive use in his concrete poems.

Notably, in all these passages, an object's value is suggested by meticulous detailing of its visual properties, rather than by semantic explication. Besides reflecting the influence of writers such as Tolstoy – and symbolists like Sologub, referenced on *The Sea-Bed's* dust-jacket – this suggests a tendency to envisage the "truth" of a given phenomenon in visual terms, and a related suspicion of semantics, which became more pronounced during Finlay's concrete period. Such is Finlay's faith in the visual that he often reconfigures the data of one sense – sound, for example – using an optical analogy: the motorbike in "The Old Man and the Trout" leaves "its sound spread out behind it like a long, black snake" (8); the narrator of "Boy with Wheel" loses his thoughts in a "tiny sound" which "span off the rim", "like an endless audible inch-tape that glittered in my ears" (26). This enfolding of sound in sight predicts poems such as "The Practice".

## *The Dancers Inherit the Party*

Finlay's first poetry collection was published in autumn 1960, after he had moved to Edinburgh in around 1956. In Edinburgh, Finlay's emotional condition seemingly deteriorated, his agoraphobia setting in. Alec Finlay refers to periods of psychiatric treatment at the Davidson Clinic in Edinburgh and the Ross Clinic, Aberdeen (16), apparently around 1959-60 and from August 1960-November 1961 respectively.[9]

Correspondence from this period reveals the decentred state of experience against which the stabilising formal and thematic patterns of Finlay's writing were imposed. "It is as if I would be annihilated by things, which are other", he writes to Hendry from Edinburgh (1959-60?), referring to agoraphobic episodes during walks to "the clinic": "previously, through art, I could make a world where everything was related, and joined". Finlay refused to accept, as he felt his psychiatrists suggested, the absence of any such patterns, which would also have extinguished the pathos of the subject's suffering in searching for them.[10] As Alistair Peebles has recently clarified, Finlay spent short periods of time during the winter of 1955-56 and spring 1959 on Rousay, one of the Orkney Islands. "[A]lienated in the city", Peebles suggests, Finlay saw Rousay "as a place where he might be able to be happy, free of the anxiety if not the agoraphobia" (n.pag): perhaps a place where things could be "related and joined". Certainly, the island's landscape and character are transmuted into contemporaneous work.

The rendering of such thematic patterns – particularly those established by love – and the pathos of self-alienation, are qualities central to *The Dancers*. Along with a sustained focus on the visual dimensions of objects, and their parallels with others in the same sensory landscape, these qualities foreshadow many of the concerns evident in Finlay's concrete work.

Before proceeding to these points, it is worth acknowledging the collection's similarities to the work of American poets such as Robert Creeley, Cid Corman and particularly Lorine Niedecker, of which Finlay became aware through Gael Turnbull shortly before his transatlantic Migrant Press published *The Dancers*. An early letter from Finlay to Turnbull (May 2, 1960) reveals that they had very recently become acquainted through Turnbull's UK collaborator Michael Shayer, to whom Finlay had submitted poems for Turnbull's journal *Migrant*.[11] On August 27, [1960] Finlay wrote requesting books by Robert Duncan, William Carlos Williams and others; on November 14 he states "I was very impressed by the 'Black Mountain Review',…Nothing of that sort could be done here"; on April 25, 1961:[12]

> If you could ever send me (find me) any Louis Zukovsky [sic.] I would be very pleased. The more I see of American poems, etc. the more I feel that they have

> arrived at much the same conceptions as I have, in my own wee way, rather home-made, and AGAINST everything I was taught to do by other Scotch writers. I think Lorine Niedecker's poems are superb....P.S….I have just realised how wonderful Creeley is! Terrific!

The aesthetic kinship Finlay spotted is worth acknowledging: not as evidence that *The Dancers* adapted an American poetic idiom in the way that the short stories had responded to Russian or Scandinavian literature, but in suggesting that Finlay's route to concrete through linear poetry independently followed a course comparable to that plotted by American concrete poets working out of the objectivist tradition. It is also likely that the poets he mentions influenced his subsequent sense of concrete poetry's formal possibilities, and, as those letters suggest, that after *The Dancers* they became imagined allies in another alliance against Scottish literary culture, prefiguring Finlay's kinship with the concretists. The Wild Hawthorn Press's publication of Niedecker's *My Friend Tree* late in 1961 and Zukofsky's *16 Once Published* in 1962, and Corman's dedication of a 1962 issue of *Origin* to Finlay's work, attest to this.

Niedecker's work in particular bears extraordinary similarities to Finlay's early-1960s poetry. Edward Dorn's introduction to *My Friend Tree* notes her ability to sound out, in terms "brief and very clear", "the placements of an inner world", thus evoking "the size ... of some kind of nation (people)" ([3]). Writing of his own poetry to Neidecker (June 30, 1961), Finlay referred in similar terms to capturing "an inner thing … in the <u>movement</u> (not metre) and the implication" of language, which would nonetheless harness the spirit of a community and place: "when I see your poems, and Z[ukofsky]'s, I see that you belong to the same world". For Niedecker the "inner world" evoked was Black Hawk Island, for Finlay, at this time, perhaps Rousay. Niedecker's frequent tone of loving address, and focus on evanescent sentiment, are also highly reminiscent of *The Dancers*:

> Paul
> when the leaves
> fall
>
> from their stems
> that lie thick
> on the walk

……..

the little
thin things
Paul. ("Paul")[13]

Niedecker's sonic register throughout this collection, typified by phonetic modulations such as "thin things", might also have influenced that of *Rapel*, with its "happy apples" and "eatable/tables". As Smith notes, there are also clear parallels between Finlay and Creeley: "the everyday language and subject matter, the playful musicality of their line, not to mention the strong sense of place. Most importantly, [Finlay] shares with Creeley and the post-Poundians an interest in the poem as an object" (n.pag.).

Putting aside such chance affinities, *The Dancers* also contains many inter-textual references, notably to Apollinaire in "Glasgow Poem" and the Japanese poet Tatsuji Miyoshi in "Snow in Rousay".[14] As Abrioux notes in his *Visual Primer*, the boat-lemon analogy of "The English Colonel Explains an Orkney Boat" – first explored, Alec Finlay notes, in the 1956 short story "The Splash" ("Notes" 288) – also presages the cubist still-life-oriented metaphors of many of Finlay's concrete poems (189). But more significant than such cultural cross-references as markers of thematic duality are those drawn between people, specifically through a certain conception of love as the establishment of shared thought, proving to each partner the integrity of their own:

O, I was incomplete,
I was the only one,
One and one and one
Unsweet, with what a burning
Word unspoken
In my head; but then I said –

What she said, and I had my sun. ("Love Poem")

As a foretaste of concrete style, we might immediately note the various pictorial qualities with which the caricatured lament "O" is endowed through semantic hint, becoming first a hole – "O, I was incomplete" – then a solar eclipse of ennui: "A word was in my head,/ O,

it was across my sun" (ibid.). But equally pertinent, in its establishment of thematic duality, is the representation of love as a union of minds – "I said – / What she said" – and bulwark of emotional and moral certainty.

A similar stability is supplied by the formal analogies drawn between different objects in the poet's sensory environment. "The Chief Crop of Orkney" begins:

> As everyone is well aware, the chief crop of Orkney is
> wireless-poles ….

"Catch" equates lobsters with helicopters:

> There once was a fisherman of Scrabster
> Caught in his pot a gey queer lapster.
>
> Thought he, this lapster's a sure sellar,
> A tail it has, and a wee propeller, ….

Elsewhere, the title character of "Problems of an Orkney Housewife" laments the difficulty of keeping "a clean moon" – "We have to polish ours THREE times a week" – while the titular vessel of "The Island Beasts Wait for the Boat", "as a little foal/ Is all long legs…" Such analogies seem comically surreal, but actually posit a Rousay-esque world of intuitively posited similarities between objects, of the kind buried by an adult sense of their function. The resulting effect of sensory integration or rhyming is heightened by their bridging the divide between the natural and man-made: crops and telegraph poles, lobsters and helicopters, boats and foals. The technique establishes a reassuring ontological stasis, whereby the imposition of human onto natural processes does not fundamentally alter the qualitative nature of the universe, the subject's intimations of the human universe thus shown to be rooted in timeless patterns. However, such models of order seem evidence of a disorientation only temporarily overcome, both in their brevity, and because of the apparent vulnerability of the gentle, naively comic narrator.

As Edwin Morgan notes in "Early Finlay", "[p]erhaps the traditional, rhyme-and-metre poem which foreshadows his later interests most unmistakably is 'Scene' … " (21):

> The fir tree stands quite still and angles
> On the hill, for green Triangles.
>
> Stewing in its billy there
> The tea is strong, and brown, and Square.
>
> The rain is Slant. Soaked fishers sup
> Sad ellipses from a cup. [15]

Whereas in other poems the qualities of one object are unearthed in another, these objects are stripped even of their own specificity, reduced to a set of geometrical shapes: triangle, square, "Sad ellipses". The poem thus grants visual objects something of the sheer, disturbing presence of the great cod. But an elementary formal correlation subsists in the neat sequence *triangle*, *square, circle*, rendering it a symbolically integrative gesture, evidence of "a natural world where structure and order are inherent" rather than an intimation of oblivious matter ("Early Finlay" 21); the "sadness" evoked is picturesque and cathartic, not devastating. In teetering between integration with and intransigence to the poet's invocations of symbolic order, this poem's central motif prefigures the two opposing qualities granted to material objects in Finlay's concrete poems.

*Glasgow Beasts, An a Burd*

The publication of *The Dancers* coincided with a dispute between a group of Scottish writers including Finlay and a literary milieu associated with the late manifestation of the Scottish Renaissance which was coming to a head in September 1961 when *Glasgow Beasts, An a Burd* appeared, the first project of Finlay and Jessie McGuffie's Wild Hawthorn Press, operated from the flat they shared in Fettes Row from November 1961. This dispute, again revealing Finlay's simultaneous need for, and aversion to, group membership, was incited by the 1959 publication of *Honour'd Shade*, a bicentenary anthology for Burns felt to be dominated by the older group, belying the scope of contemporary Scottish poetry. A cassette called *Dishounour'd Shade* appeared, featuring readings of Finlay and other poets, followed by various denouncements in newspapers and journals. Hugh MacDiarmid published an incendiary pamphlet, *The Ugly Birds Without Wings,* early in 1962, attacking Finlay and

"Scotland's self-pitying *jeunes refusés*" for mediocrity, opportunism and iconoclasm (6). The debacle concluded with a confrontation between MacDiarmid and Alexander Trocchi at the 1962 Edinburgh Writers' Conference.[16]

It is perhaps partly the allegiances which Finlay forged during this dispute which lead critics including Alec Finlay and Stewart Smith to associate the style and ethos of his late-1950s-early-1960s poetry with the folk and beat scenes then emerging in Scotland – especially Edinburgh – which occupied comparably antagonistic positions in relation to the Renaissance. Given the continuities between Finlay's early-1960s and concrete poetry, these affirmed connections merit exploration as possible influences on the latter. Alec Finlay refers to a "rackety" allegiance forged with the folk balladeer Hamish Henderson and Morgan, "an avant-garde that was oddly homely, less a programmatic movement than a fey shoulder pressed against the wheel of the moribund Scottish Renaissance", rooted in shared interests in "folk culture, contemporary poetry, art and a hotchpotch of sentiment" ("Introduction" 20). Smith, in a broadly focused forthcoming article, stresses Finlay's connection to the beat-oriented "grassroots scene" emerging in Edinburgh around Jim Haynes's Paperback Bookshop, which opened in autumn 1959, becoming "a cultural hub, hosting readings, exhibitions and performances", stocking "American and European texts" and supporting little magazines and presses (n.pag.). Among the poets able to "flourish" in this environment were Alex Neish, whose 1959 "American" issue of the Edinburgh University review *Jabberwock* introduced Burroughs, Ginsberg, Kerouac, Snyder et al. to a Scottish audience, and preceded his two beat-influenced issues of *Sidewalk* (1960-61) (ibid.).

Certainly, Finlay was connected to such milieux by circles of acquaintance, publication and performance: "Orkney Interior" appeared in *Sidewalk* 1; "The Practice" was published, along with Morgan's concrete poetry and a section from the Noigandres' pilot plan, in the second issue of Bill McArthur's Edinburgh-based *Cleft* (1964), a journal inspired by *Sidewalk*'s example. Finlay also published beat poets such as Pete Brown and Anselm Hollo in early issues of *POTH* and in *Fish-Sheet* (1963), while his own pre-concrete work appeared in beat-influenced anthologies such as Hollo's *Jazz Poems* (1963), and was performed at an Edinburgh festival at which, according to Alec Finlay, Hollo, Horovitz, Brown and others also read ("Introduction" 19). I would advise caution, however, in

associating these practical connections with a sense of artistic and ethical kinship on Finlay's part exceeding an assumption of common enmity to the Renaissance. Undoubtedly, some such kinship existed, as implied by Finlay's affectionate descriptions to Cid Corman (November 14, 1961) of the "gentle and sweet" beat poets with "anti-Bomb badges" who performed at that festival (qtd. in A. Finlay "Introduction" 19). But Finlay's concern with the distillation of moral and ethical order would also have connoted wariness, even by the early 1960s, of "protest" art and the political values it inscribed, making many aspects of beat poetry suspect. The Marxist overtones of the new folk culture as represented by Henderson would probably have been subject to the same scepticism, exemplified by Finlay's assessment of Horovitz's *New Departures* journal in an undated 1963 letter to Houédard: "it is too much a reaction AGAINST, with the other things always there, by implication,…protest lives off complacency, and art should stand on beauty alone". This said, Finlay certainly took from the folk scene an attunement to the rhythm, intonation and dialect of balladry evident in *Glasgow Beasts*, whose Glaswegian orthography, as Alec Finlay suggests, adapts the "vernacular of music hall and folk-song", and in early concrete collections such as *Rapel*, whose title transcribes a snippet of folk lyric ("Introduction" 24).

Singled out for criticism in MacDiarmid's pamphlet, *Glasgow Beasts* counteracts in various ways the perceived density and introspection of much recent Scottish verse, through a lighter, more "poppy" mood than previous works, and through the connections it nonetheless establishes with foreign artists and cultures. Its primary interest in this context, however, lies in a kind of formal duality involving phonetic sound which presages the material emphases of his concrete verse. These points are addressed in turn.

The booklet is written in the guise of an infantile narrator recalling the times he "became" different animals, a theme reminiscent of Apollinaire's *Bestiary*. But in its playful emphasis on novelty, it more clearly approximates children's literature, an association strengthened by its introduction as "a wee buik fur big weans" ([5]). The first poem invokes Burns's "sleekit, cow'rin" mouse (fig. 1).[17] The narrator later becomes a bedbug, a fish and, in the jokiest piece, "a zebra/ heh heh/ crossin" ([19]). These poems lack the poignancy of earlier collections, partly because of the dominance of the comic register, partly because their subject is more exotic than naturalistic. These qualities seem designed to counterpose


Fig. 1. From *Glasgow Beasts, An a Burd* ([11])

the overwroughtness of much contemporary Scottish verse. However, the collection also subtly draws various worldly thematic parallels, notably exploring Buddhist concepts of reincarnation, as suggested by the final poem's opening lines "come back/ as a coal-hoarse" ([31]). As Sheeler notes, Finlay's lineation and phrasing are also adapted from a Japanese Tanka form, comprising "brief verses of a syllable pattern set in a way which grew naturally from the speech patterns of the language" (13). The booklet is dedicated to the Japanese poet Shimpei Kusano, whose "Rainy Season", Corman's translation of which appeared in

*POTH* 2 (1962), mirrors Finlay's perpendicular lineation, phonetic insistency and zoological theme:

> Tepid night.
> The warted frogbacks heaving swelling.
> Slime slime slime slime everywhere.
> Smallpox.
> Sodden.
> O unblinking frogs.
> In the bamboo's
> blue-green smoke.
>
> From the sea.
> Hordes of polyp descended.

This application of an exotic aesthetic idiom to a "local" subject matter – in this case the Glaswegian dialect – revealing new qualities within it which seem initially alienating but, on reflection, to always have been there, predicates the imbrication of the formally alien and thematically familiar in Finlay concrete poetry.

However, a clearer precedent for that work lies in the kind of formal duality established by its phonetic composition. The *Beasts'* Glaswegian phonetics, forged from reference points in contemporary popular culture, partly cocks a snook at MacDiarmid's dense, etymologically preoccupied "Synthetic Scots", a flagship Renaissance project decried by Finlay in a letter to Guy Davenport for creating "dead Scots animated by some freak electric energy", poems "dug up from a culture that never existed" (November 17, 1968). But the resultant poetic register dislodges easy reading as much as offering an intuitively graspable pop dialect, traversing sound and sense in a manner which both reveals the peculiarity of all dialects to outsiders, and establishes a striking interaction between the poems' linguistic and sonic registers. The highland cow sequence above, for example, sets up a dense pattern of sonic echoes, notably between the assonant "hooch" and "coo", whose bovine *oos* are foregrounded in the subsequent "hoo hoos", and in the joke capping the poem: "ferr feart/ o ma/ herr-do". The sound of a mooing cow is effectively buried in the poem's semantic register, periodically surfacing as the reader's inability to semantically process the language leaves only its sound in place. The technique is most evident in lines

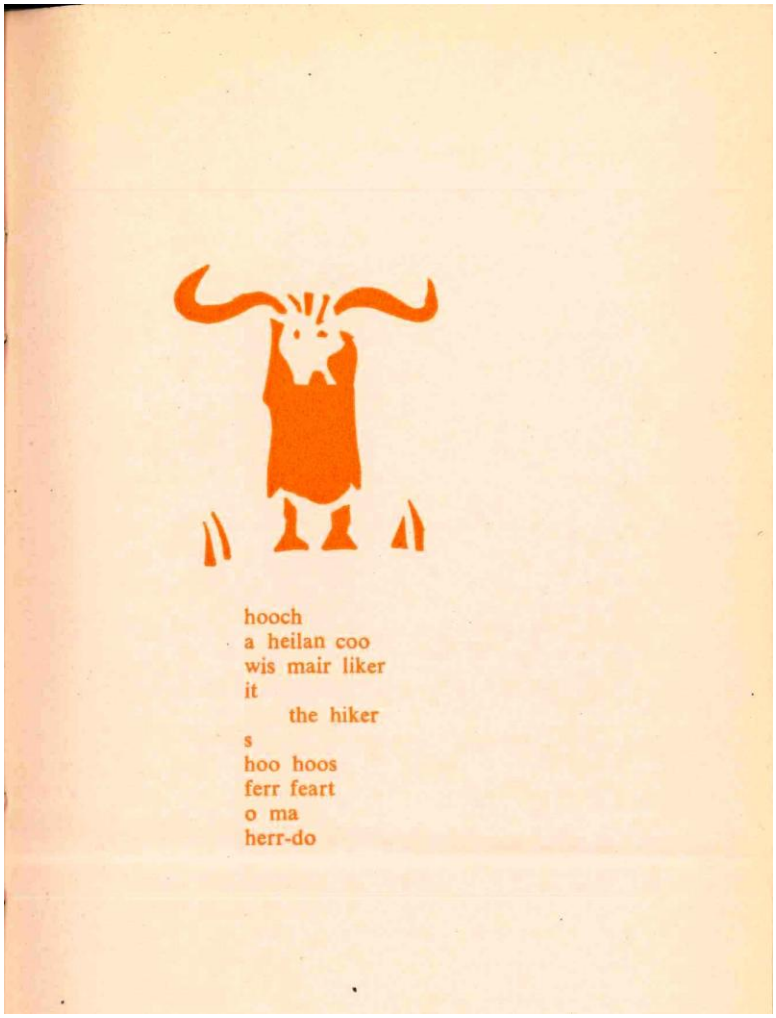



Fig. 2. From *Glasgow Beasts, An a Burd* ([23]).

such as "hoo hoos" and "ferr feart", which seem primarily to be sonic modulations, only secondarily sentences; it is compounded by a fragmentary lineation which dislodges graphemes from sentences, like the solitary *s* above. This use of language as a concatenation of aural fragments inaugurated a period of interest in sound or sonic concrete poetry culminating in Finlay's editorship of the single issue of *Fish-Sheet* (June 1963).

Despite the pre-eminence thus granted to sound, this collection also clearly explores the visual possibilities of the poem-as-text, using illustrations like those which had accompanied previous publications as more central features. Each poem shares a page with

a paper-cut picture by John Picking and Pete McGinn, which dominates the visual frame and adds some essential quality to the creature depicted, through suggestions of mannerism or movement. The freedom granted Finlay to pursue such visual-linguistic projects by setting up his own press cannot be underestimated.

*Concertina*

Writing to Derek Stanford on August 2, 1968, Finlay recalled:

> [A]fter my "The Dancers Inherit The Party" ... and "Glasgow Beasts" ... I became very perturbed about what I called "syntax" or WAY of putting word together. The sense of movement with which my poems had always begun, was simply absent,… "Glasgow Beasts" in fact used language in a rather concrete way – and then I did a wee fold-out thing called "Concertina" which joined pictures (graphics) and words. At the same time I started making toys, which were really (though models of boats, windmills, or whatever), models of poems, since they had the qualities I was seeking – they weren't cold but neither were they "confessional", "self-expressive", loud, blatant, confused, involved, fussy….

The period between September 1961 and around May 1962, when Finlay encountered concrete poetry, is often considered one of creative torpor, perhaps because his toys – two of which are stored at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art (fig. 3) – represent an abandonment of language and embrace of material construction suggesting the two processes to only have been reconciled through concrete poetry.[18] However, during this period Finlay edited his second Wild Hawthorn publication (*My Friend Tree*), published the illustrated booklet-poem *Concertina* (April 1962), and continued editing *POTH*, projects which reveal an increasing sense of the visual and formal possibilities of the poetic medium prior to his encounter with the Noigandres.

*Concertina* hones the connections between human and natural environments established in *The Dancers*, while making more extensive use than *Glasgow Beasts* of the visual dimensions of the text to configure reading, also revealing a new attentiveness to the symbolic potential of its physical aspects. A single poem, again employing a shape-shifting

Fig. 3. Toy Cow (early 1960s).

narrator, it is printed across the panels of a concertina-style folding booklet, each section assigning a snippet of reported speech to an element of the kind of rural landscape familiar from Finlay's short stories: the burn, the field, the billycan, the stove, the butterfly, the hedge, the docken, the noon-day, the night-time. Formal connections are built up with the sights and sound of an urban environment through jokey double-meaning: on the first panel, "The burn" announces " 'With my harmonica I will now play a little medley of well known tunes.' ", using an auditory metaphor common in the stories. The field opposite hollers " 'Hey fellas, here's grasses.' ", mimicking, as Finlay wrote to Houédard (1963), a "working class dada catchphrase 'hey fellas, here's lassies' (girls) which people shout with huge glee". In another frame, the hedge quips " 'Buzz-buzz...chirp-chirp...and all that jazz….' ". The urban setting implied by these references to music-hall and high street, and the suggestion of auditory collaging, invite comparison with urban "found sound" poems such as Apollinaire's "Lundi Rue Christine". But if such works were written to bypass the binding ego of poetic association, Finlay casts the multiplicity of voices thus released into relief against a larger backdrop of posited consistency: the unchanging cycles of the natural world out of which, it is implied, human behavior has developed. As in *The Dancers*, formal comparisons between human and natural environments suggest the timeless qualities not only of the burn's reedy babbling, for example, but of the patterns of human speech and behavior which are the tenor of such metaphors. This little booklet thus foreshadows the reintegration of the formal experiments of early-twentieth-century avant-gardes into a constructive rather than antagonistic view of Western culture in Finlay's concrete poetry, by recourse to immutable natural law.

It is also the most visually adventurous work which Finlay produced before his introduction to concrete, with orange and silver-blue prints by Picking filling each panel, pushing text to its borders as in comic strips. However, the unique contribution of concrete style remains evident in as much as visual effects are distinct from, rather than integrated with, the poem's language. The physical aspects of the solicited reading process are also significant: as the title suggests, unfolding the booklet creates a theatrical analogy between

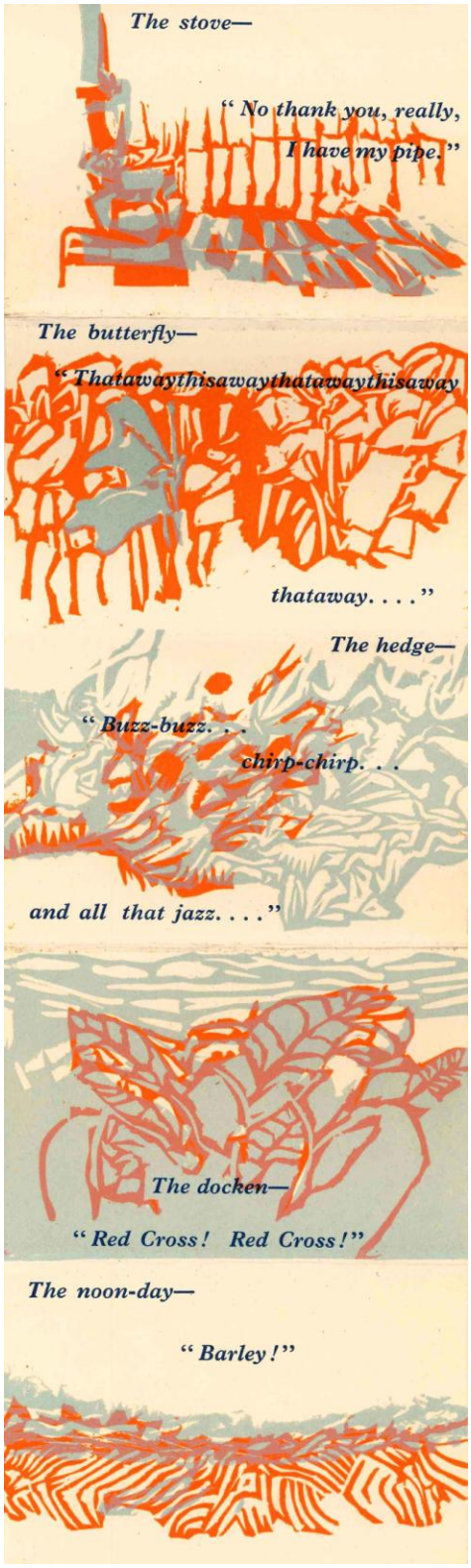



Fig. 4. From *Concertina*.

the reader, who must bring their arms back in to fold it back up, and the concertina player, an allegorical gesture predicting Finlay's booklet-poems.

Concrete Poetry

In his letter to Stanford, Finlay continued: "around this point, via Edwin Morgan, I saw my first Brazilian concrete poem – and I read their manifesto, which had much to say about syntax, or rather, about replacing it with 'pure' juxtapositions of words" (August 2, 1968). Writing to Houédard in response to a request for information for his article "Paradada", Morgan recalled that as well as contacting Melo e Castro in response to the *TLS* note, he also "told IHF about the letter" (July 14/15, 1964). Morgan must also have passed on Augusto de Campos's address from Melo e Castro, as a letter from Finlay received by Morgan on August 2, 1962 states: "heard from the Brazil poet, who you so kindly told us about, and will publish some". Writing to Creeley early the following year (January 8, 1963), Finlay recounted his own first attempts at composing concrete poems, connecting the impulse with toy-making:

> I tried to write a couple myself, partly because on Christmas Day (which was a right disaster, with no cigarettes, and one tin of Heinz beans), I made a wee red sled out of cardboard, and suddenly thought, how nice it was to have just the simple object, the toy, which also brimmed with feeling, if you cared to really look. (qtd. in A. Finlay "Introduction" 29)

What attracted Finlay to Brazilian concrete poetry? He later commented to Stanford (September 19, 1967) that at this time, "the movement of the lines" had "quite deserted me". The admission suggests a detachment from semantic sense, a feeling that it reflected its own internal logic rather than the essence of its referent partly associable with the depersonalisation triggered by mental traumas which had continued well into the 1960s: language, after all, is constitutive of, and constituted by, self. The letter also recalls being "haunted by inklings of a much purer method, the poem-as-thing", to which concrete must have seemed uncannily adapted. Biographically speaking, we might thus consider the re-emergence of language in Finlay's poetry as a series of static markers a means of

hypostasising various elementary concepts through which to reconstruct an emotionally and morally inhabitable universe.

Of course, leaning on biographical detail overrides Finlay's warning, quoted in Abrioux's *Visual Primer,* that "much of one's life is only nominally related to oneself, yet the telling of it seems to assume that it is telling about the person in a 'true' sort of way" (159). Although this statement seems partly self-protective – "I lack a bearable biography", he remarked to Stanford (August 2, 1968) – we must primarily, of course, place such developments in their relevant intellectual and artistic climate.

Partly, the adaptation of an ostentatiously "avant-garde", international poetic idiom seems a further means of counteracting the perceived cultural and formal introspection of much recent Scottish poetry. The application of that idiom to the often rusticated subject matter of Finlay's concrete poems is also a further instance of his reimagining native environments by appeal to non-native traditions felt to "fit" it: a kind of thematic duality. We might equally link his engagement with concrete to the quasi-spiritual faith in visual perception evident in the stories, or his newfound enthusiasm for American poets like Creeley, whose contemporary poems distilled linear syntax into similarly temporally, conceptually discrete parts; Weaver's "Concrete Poetry" offers a pertinent comparison between concrete syntax and Creeley's thematically slight, line-sliced phrases.

The subtext of Finlay's letter to Stanford is also reminiscent of the relationship between language and reality posited in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*: that, simply speaking, the sense of "reality" generated by linguistic engagement with external phenomena in fact reflected the internal logic of linguistic thought itself. The small and homely vehicles of the metaphors Wittgenstein uses to establish this point – seemingly deliberately resistant to abstraction into allegories for language's "general" structures, whose existence the text denies – are suggestively reminiscent of the wee objects which populate Finlay's early concrete poems: apples, for example:

> I send someone shopping. I give him a slip marked "five red apples". He takes the slip to the shopkeeper, who opens the drawer marked "apples", then he looks up the word "red" in a table and finds a colour sample opposite it; then he says the series of cardinal numbers—I assume he knows them by heart—up to the word "five" and for each number he takes an apple of the same colour as the sample out

of the drawer.—It is in this and similar ways that one operates with words. (2-3)

Given the titular hint of *The Blue and the Brown Poems*, such parallels suggest the possible influence of the *Investigations* on Finlay's concrete poetry. It thus seems significant that Wittgenstein's solution, as it were, to a sense of the cleavage between language and reality is to reframe reality not as a pre-existing entity distorted by the "language game" used to access it, but as something constructed in and by that game itself: there is no "beyond" from which words bar us. Such connections suggest that Finlay's spatially juxtaposed words ought not only to be considered signs metaphorically imbued with the capacity to access a realm of truthfulness impervious to semantics: they are also counters arranged for play, whose childlike smallness of scope implies the absence of any such beyond, and thus their own world-shaping power. In these early concrete poems – and it is hard not to invoke biography here – that world seems highly inhibited, yet desperately significant.

Regarding influences upon *Rapel*, it is finally worth noting that Finlay seemingly remained unaware of Gomringer's work until after its completion. In 1963, in what appears his first letter to Houédard (dated May 29) Finlay asks for Gomringer's address, and for details of his Konkrete Poesie series: "[a]ll my poems since a long while are 'concrete' (of a sort), and I am good friends with the Brazil ones, esp. Augusto de Campos", "but I have no European contacts of that sort".[19] On 15 April, he had written to Hendry "I have written several more concrete poems … enough for my book Rapel". This apparent ignorance is surprising, as that collection's recurrent focus on private aesthetic revelation is more akin to Gomringer's intimistic 1950s constellations than the politicised modulations of much of the de Camposes' contemporaneous work, for example.

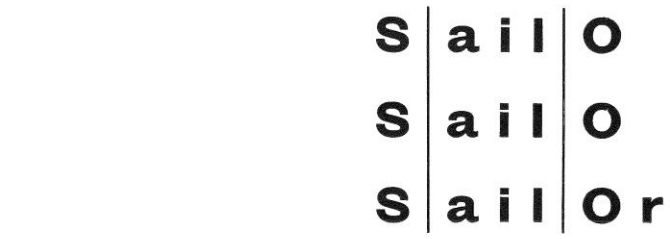
*Rapel: 10 Fauve and Suprematist Poems*

Finlay's first concrete poetry collection represents a comprehensive stylistic break from the work which preceded it: partly because, whereas earlier collections had used images as illustrations, *Rapel* explores the visual qualities of language itself, an emphasis enhanced by the presentation of its ten constituent poems as individual visual frames, on loose sheets of card in a folder.[20] It also orders language's syntactical flow in a new way, using patterns of

grammatical and phonetic modulation to string together words or language-forms, and to imply qualitative links between the objects and concepts they evoke.

The latter technique, clearly indebted to the Noigandres, is exemplified by "An Eatable Peach", in which the words "table", "eatable" and "apple" are reiterated in a circle around the centre of the page. Besides the visual-linguistic allusion to cubist still life, this generates a cyclical pattern of phonetic and graphic permutation, notably through the different phonetic renderings of the common grammatical kernel "table", the visual rotation of *p* into *b* from "apple" to "[ea]table", and the words' shared phonetic closure in *e*. Discrete components of a sensory landscape seem bound together through the visual and sonic linkages between the words which evoke them, becoming "versions" of each other, species of the same genus: formal duality – established through the visual-sonic registers of language itself – renders thematic duality. "Ballad" exploits a similar grammatical modulation: the word "sail", printed three times in blue sans-serif font in a descending line, grows larger with each appearance until, upon the fourth, it unfurls into "sailor". Again, the morphological link evokes a relationship between the person and the object described, while also alluding to folk balladry, or the water-bound vessel as emblem of the fugitive aesthetic spirit in Rimbaud or Mallarmé. This piece's visual appearance, as well as being defined by letter repetition, also seems diagrammatic, the increasing font size rendering the subtlest impression of a boat nearing a shoreline, its passenger emerging into focus. "S.O.S Poem" is technically and thematically similar, but uses spatial atomisation rather than repetition and permutation to reveal one word within another, implying a duality between "ailing" and "sailing".

In "The Practice" (fig. 6) such phonetic and graphic permutation becomes so pronounced as to uncharacteristically efface semantic sense; although the repeated *o*s do partly render the oboe practice a tragedic lament. This is *Rapel's* most purely "formal" poem, which, given that its formal effects are more sonic than visual, suggests the greater capacity of sonic expression to achieve genuine "non-referentiality". However, writing to Morgan on June 25, 1963, Finlay explained that this was a sound to be seen and not heard: "['The Practice'] has a peculiar and new relation to sound … that is, it is heard silently. Only in that way does it have SHAPE, and the shape is, actually, two right angles,




s o s poem i h f

Fig. 5. "S.O.S Poem"

connected by a so to speak dotted diagonal (which is not its visual shape, of course.)" This dense synaesthetic metaphor, whereby imagined audition is re-envisaged as a visual shape – reminiscent of the reframing of sound as sight in the short stories – hints at the predominance which visual gesture would later assume in Finlay's concrete, "not a visual but a silent poetry", as he put it in his *Domestic Penseés*.

Turning to the first quality mentioned above, in *Rapel* those visual gestures oscillate between nominally non-figurative effects often difficult to distinguish from grammatical and phonetic emphases, and pictorial reference. Finlay acknowledged the distinction by subtitling the collection "Fauve and Suprematist Poems", referencing the Suprematist Malevich's monolithic icons, notionally un-rooted in subjective perception, and the abstracted organic representations of the fauvists, previously emulated by the Scottish


Fig. 6. “The Practice”.

colourists, whom Finlay perhaps also invokes. The latter type of gesture prefigures Finlay's re-separation of the visual and linguistic, creating images which make sense independently of the semantic meanings of the words used to construct them; whereas the non-figurative visuals of classical concrete has attempted to assume sub-semantic value. It also re-authorised a conventional lexicon of visual symbols by "imitating natural appearances", a tendency associated in the "Pilot Plan" with a less "advanced" stage of concrete technique, partly because it tended to debar that sub-semantic suggestion. For both reasons, such effects presage Finlay's movement away from concrete style. The untitled poem below (fig. 7) exemplifies the technique, reframing the analogy between running burn-water and harmonica music evoked in *Concertina* with an uneven rill of blue and green *m*s and *x*s, meandering down the right-hand side of the page: an image established by a later title as a "Homage to Larionov". A phrase materialises at its surface near the bottom of the page, the semantic metaphor enhanced by the subtle pictoriality of the little stream of text, blue and green letters evoking the water's shifting tones, alteration between serif and sans serif font the eddies at its surface. The reference to the mill, meanwhile, renders *m* and *x* an image of undulating water approaching a wheel, as well as an onomatopoeic impression of a trickling burn.

Often fauve and Suprematist impulses are evident in the same poem. In "To the Painter, Juan Gris", the rustic scene set by the core phrase "happy/ apple/ pip" – again, note the grammatical and phonetic modulations – is enhanced by fauvist pictorial qualities: two russet-coloured arching words which hint through shape and tone at an organic fruit-like form, consolidating the semantic hint "apple". But the poem also concentrates its semantic meaning through non-figurative visual patterning: the reverse symmetrical *pp*s and visual mirroring of "happy" and "apple", and the inorganic blue *i* of the connecting word "pip", which suggests the trans-figurative seed of inspiration at the poem's root. It is finally worth noting that, besides functioning as vessels for thematic duality, the formal dualities established throughout such visual effects themselves comprise a kind of thematic duality by rendering language and visual expression analogous, hinting at some homogenous, prelapsarian expressive mode from which the two have been shorn away.

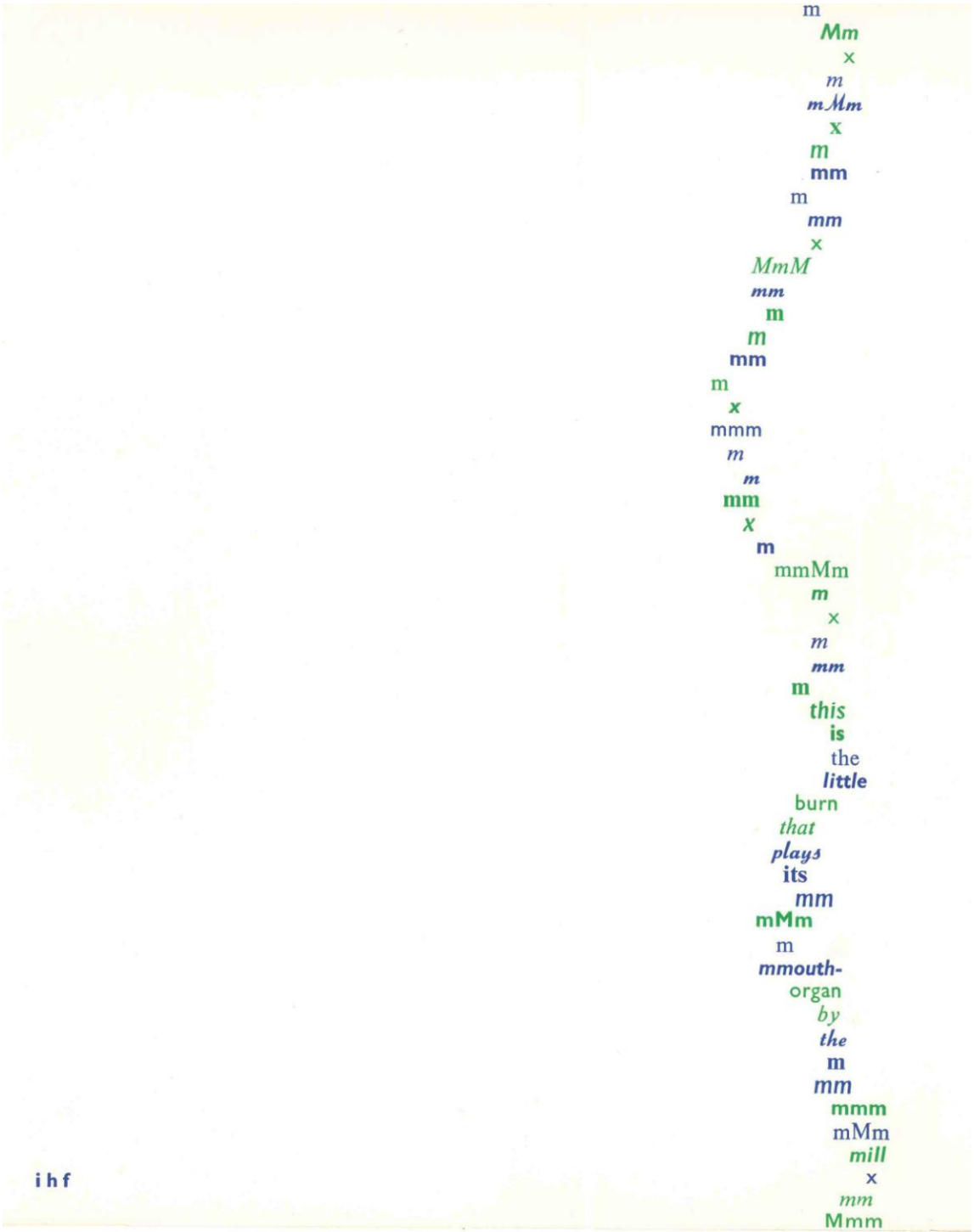

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Fig. 7. “m”.

*Telegrams from My Windmill*

In 1963, Finlay came into contact with Gomringer – seemingly recalling receipt of his first letter to Houédard on July 16 – and, probably, with poets such as Ernst Jandl in Austria and Pierre Garnier in Amiens, thus establishing the "Vienna-Switzerland-Amiens-São-Paulo-Edinburgh circuit" which Bann notes to have inaugurated concrete practice in the UK (personal interview, August 17, 2010). Discussion with other English and Scottish poets such as Morgan, whose concrete poetry was first published in *Fish-Sheet* that June, and Houédard, with whom Finlay began corresponding in May, also became important. Presumably through Houédard, Finlay published "A Valentine" in the Carmelite-run *Aylesford Review* that summer: probably the first concrete poem published in England. His work also began to appear in Europe in 1963, notably in the Belgian journal *Labris* ("An Eatable Peach", "The Practice" and "Homage to Malevich", credited by Flemish adaptation to "Jan Hamilton Finlay"). Houédard's "Concrete Poetry and Ian Hamilton Finlay", published in *Typographica* that December, printed parts of the "Pilot Plan" in English for the first time, and was the first article on concrete poetry published in England or Scotland.

Finlay's next text-bound collection *Telegrams from My Windmill* appeared in autumn 1964, in the context of this burgeoning visibility. *Telegrams* is thematically distinct from *Rapel* in that, as Finlay wrote to Morgan (letter received July 21, 1964), it is "all love poems", formally distinct in that its compositional medium is the typewriter. These points relate to more integral stylistic qualities in that Finlay's rendering of "love" reprises the kind of thematic duality explored in *The Dancers*, while the even letter-widths of typewriter composition allowed words to be patterned and entwined, enhancing phonetic and grammatical connections of the kind characteristic of *Rapel*.

In this collection, the sense of love as emotional congruence established in *The Dancers* often connotes an invocation of the moral and emotional certainty established through love as an alternative to alignment with socially prevalent discourse, the talisman of what Finlay calls, in a letter to Mike Weaver, "a spiritual language stripped of worldliness" (September 16, 1964). The opening poem ("they") serves as a truncated manifesto, a triangle formed from repeated vertical columns of the word "they" tapered down to a

point, halfway across which the constituent word becomes "you", until the final line, formed from the single word "du". Perhaps acknowledging a Northern European spiritual sensibility, this German flourish seals an allegorical shift from attentiveness to social discourse – what "they" say – towards a closed, dyadic relationship between an unnamed author and a second-person lover: "you/du". The final "du" represents an unwavering, even aggressive singularity of vision, enhanced by the visual image of a finely hewn point and by its definitive seeming phonetic brevity; but it also establishes an elementary contact between two congruent spirits, "you" and "I", whose accord ensures the integrity of both. This sense of poet and lover as psychological correlates is reiterated in the following poem, in which the first-person pronoun is again the unstated component of the amalgam "us":

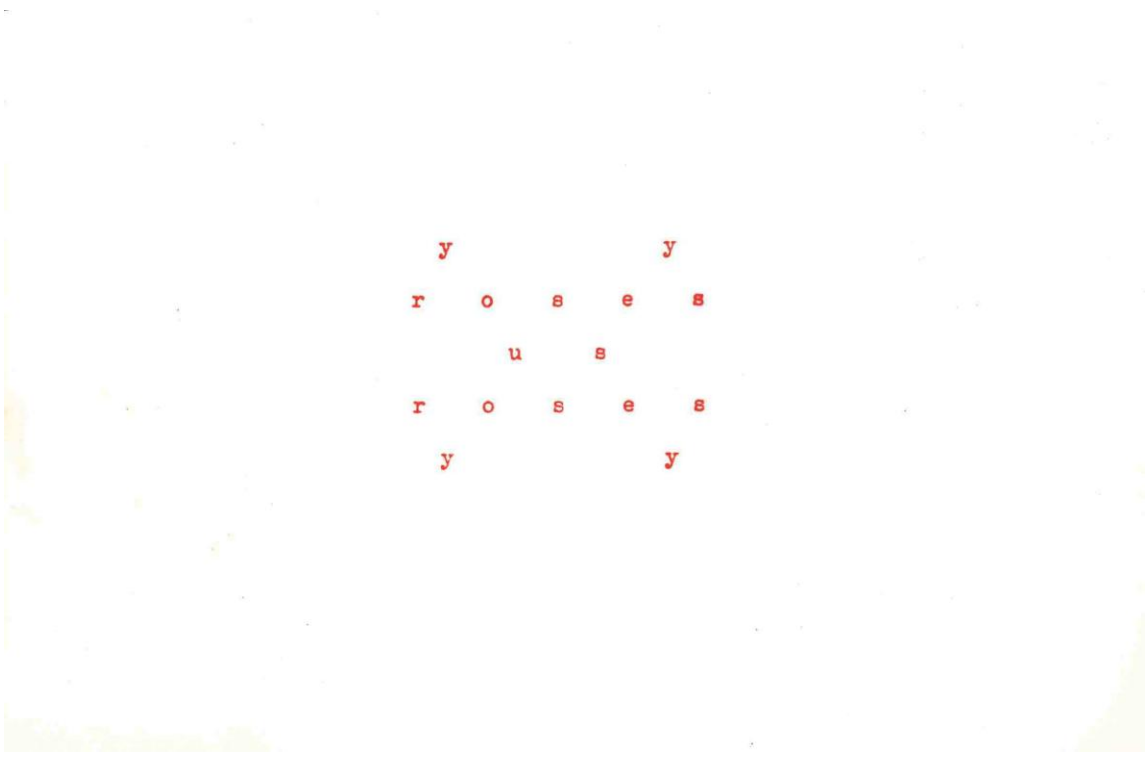


Fig. 8. "roses".

The intertwined words also hint at the aggregate "Rousay", suggesting that location's significance to Finlay as an emblem of tranquility. In other poems, a frailer seeming love is invoked, as in the piece based around the phrase "it is little", whose grammatical modulations close on the quiet lament "it is lost" ("it"); and another which entwines the words "little by little", leading to a final break-up: "by/ by" ("little"). The contingency of emotional contentment implied in previous works is more directly and affectingly suggested throughout this collection, albeit in an occasionally maudlin manner.

This establishment of phonetic and grammatical echoes between words, by crossing them over at points where they share letters, as well as other visual patterning techniques, enhances the sense of emotional accord between the subjects or spirits referred to. One poem, a block formed from the words "tendresse" and "tender dress", suggests through apparent lexical morphosis the presence of the sentiment in the garment – metonym for a "tender girl" of course – and vice versa ("tendresse"). The below poem highlights more despairingly the grammatical presence of "eve" in "never", suggesting some essential parallel between the close of the day and a diminishment of possibility or contentment; or unrequited longing for an "Eve":

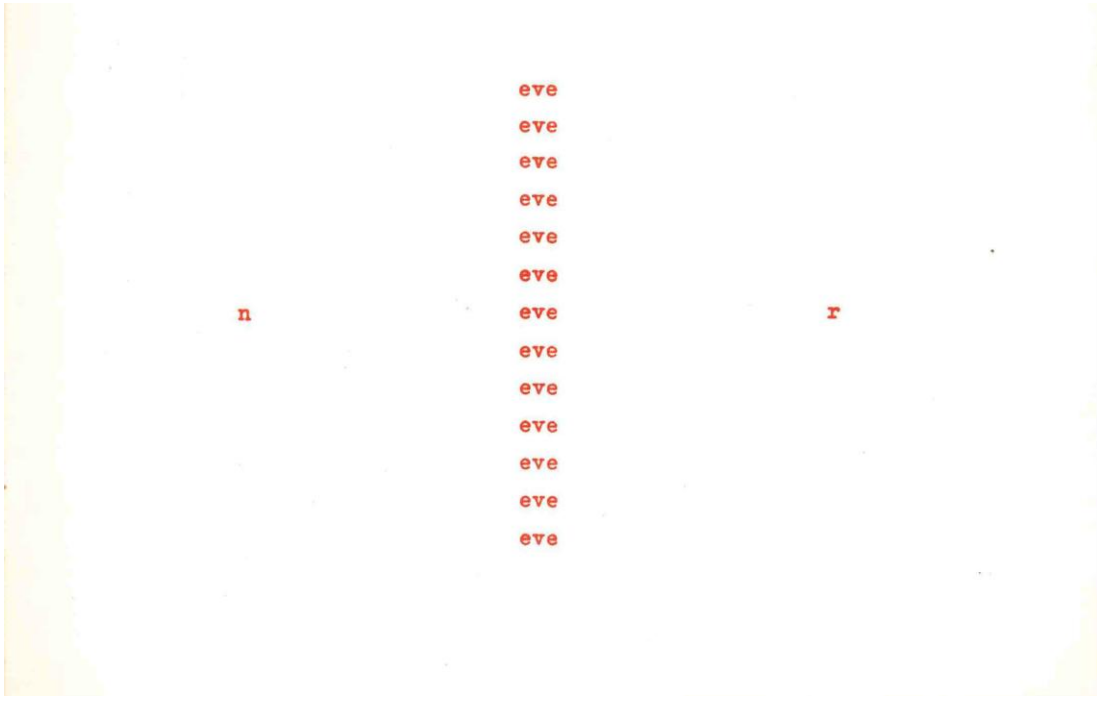


Fig. 9. "eve".

Cards and Booklets

By 1964, concrete poetry was gaining surprising cultural currency in the UK. Although its coverage in Scottish journals, other than the increasingly visually virtuosic *POTH*, remained scant, it was garnering some attention – admittedly often scurrilous – in Scottish newspapers. After Finlay and Morgan appeared in *Cleft* (1964), a 1965 issue of D.M. Black's Scottish journal *Extra Verse* was dedicated to Finlay, featuring Robert Tait's article "The Concreteness of a Wild Hawthorn". In England, two special issues of the *TLS* entitled "The Changing Guard" appeared on August 6 and September 3, 1964. Versions of Finlay's "Acrobats" and "Canal Stripe Series 3", and a photograph of his first glass poem – a version of *To the Painter, Juan Gris* (see fig. 10) – appeared in the first alongside pieces by Morgan, Houédard, Sharkey and Emmett Williams, Marshall McLuhan's article on "Culture and Technology", and Houédard's "Paradada", an early summary of the British-Irish concrete movement. Finlay had been visited in Edinburgh the same summer by Bann and Weaver, who co-curated the First International Exhibition of Concrete, Phonetic and Kinetic Poetry in Cambridge that November, the first concrete poetry exhibition in the British Isles; Bann's "Communication and Structure in Concrete Poetry" and Weaver's "Concrete and Kinetic", early appraisals of concrete style from a broadly structuralist perspective, appeared in *Image* around the same time.

This third-party engagement surely helped Finlay to clarify his own sense of his work's aesthetic and ideological scope; indeed, in future decades, Bann's analyses would comprise integrated features of certain projects. But this very framework also seemed to dispel some enticing mystique. The first signs of concrete's co-option, as Finlay saw it, by a fatuous neo-dada contingent preoccupied with shallow multi-media effects rather than the genre's underlying formal impulses, also diminished its appeal. By November 8, 1965 he was writing despairingly to Houédard regarding the catalogue he had received from Jasia Reichardt's contentiously titled exhibition Between Poetry and Painting, held at the Institute of Contemporary Art from October 22 to November 27 1965: "[c]oncrete has become something very far from my own aspirations (I don't say achievements)….I think it would be best, and perhaps essential for me, to work away on my own and forget movements,


686 THIS ELEMENTARY PURIST TEMPLE THURSDAY AUGUST 6 1964

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AVANT GARDE

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THE THEORY OF OPPOSITES OR
THE HISTORY OF NOTHING WITH
THE SUPPRESSION OF TALENT
INVOLVING THE WHEEL OF THE
LOCOMOTIVE THE BRAIN OF THE DOG
& CRANK SHAFT OF A SHIP
THE CYLINDER HEAD OF THE AERO
PLANE THE VALUE OF THE OVEN
VARIOUS DOMESTIC ARTICLES
NEW & OLD
AN ARCHITECTURE FROM
TOOLS OF THE CHILD
THE SEARCH FOR ARCH-TYPES
TO AID THE
METALLISATION OF THE 'DREAM
A SHORT HISTORY OF THE COMMON
WOODEN CIRCLES, PAPER SQUARES
, INKWEEL 1934, OLD NEWSPAPERS
AND A DICTIONARY OF GUNS.
THE CAMERA RUIND & VIRGIN
\A CLOCKWORK MASK LIKE AN EYE/
PALLAS

O PIONEERS!

THIS TUNNEL WAS BUGN BEGUBNUGN
IN 1880 WILLIAM SHARP

Workman's inscription on entrance to abandoned Channel Tunnel at Dover

Channel Tunnel bugn
1880 Sharp Wilgn

Chunnal Tennel begbugn
8801 Slunt Willubugmn

Tannel Chunnel begum
8018 Shart Willum

Chuntenlannel begubnugn
8810 Blunt Wugbumlugn

Tennal Chennul gbung
8081 Shant Willung

10880 Brigde bugn

Chennul Tenpal ~~begbugn~~ hanging
8108 Shunt Willibug

EDWIN MORGAN

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JOHN J. SHARKEY

Instant Theatre Go Home

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EDWIN MORGAN

At the top of this page are Ian Hamilton Finlay's poem in memory of Juan Gris, engraved on glass by Michael Bartlett, and a page from E. L. Paolozzi's *Metafisikal translations* (a silk-screened book published privately by the artist). Centre, across both pages, Emmett Williams giving a public reading of Mauriac's *The Son of Man* in Paris last year. Below, left, square typestract by Dom Sylvester Houédard and *Zoom*, an architectural pop-up by Warren Chalk and Ron Heron. On the next page, three cards for hospital events by R. D. Watts, and a box of cards by him and George Brecht. The whole laid out by Richard Hamilton.

Fig.10. Spread from the first "Changing Guard" *Times Literary Supplement* (August 6, 1964). The arrangement gives some sense of the "neo-dada" aesthetic with which Finlay felt concrete poetry was increasingly associated.

critics, responses etc".

Finlay's desire to distance himself from such developments partly explains his increasing wariness of the title "concrete poet". However, the restless compulsion to re-formulate poetry's physical properties which compounded that wariness was in fact coeval with his engagement with the form: a self-compelled stylistic evolution. Even Houédard's *Typographica* article could praise "the ritual jade tool" quality of Finlay's first "standing poem", published in autumn 1963. This line of enquiry would eventually lead to landscape and sculptural poem, but the prelude to such activities was his production of card and booklet-poems from that point onwards.

Finlay's card-poems represent both an increasing sense of the range of material gestures by which a poem's thematic dualities could be enhanced, and a clear shift from the classical concrete sense of visualised language as capable of some quality of intimation surpassing reference towards a sense of visual gesture as another vessel for symbol and metaphor. *Standing Poem 1* embodies the first of these principles, a paper rectangle divided by vertical green lines into eleven columns, across which appears a sequence of expanding and contracting letter-forms. "Pear", "appear" and "disappear" are picked out in orange capitals, their non-lexical linkages in lower-case green. After the fulcrum word "DISAPPEAR" the sequence drops from the top to the middle of the page, signaling a shift from letter addition to subtraction. Besides its connotations of cubist still life, the phrase lithely suggests the dependence of concepts upon objects – a pear can disappear, but disappearance cannot occur in the abstract – using a grammatical reduction and attrition process to imply the transition of one into the other by revealing their common grammatical kernel "pear". The resulting suggestion – something like Williams's "no ideas but in things" – is, appropriately enough, enhanced by the poem's qualities as an object, which elicit a complementary sense of circularity. By folding along the thicker lines, the reader is to create a standing rectangular edifice, which must be physically rotated (or rotated around) for the rotary phrase to be read: the formal duality rendered by this new sculptural quality emphasises the thematic duality which the poem evokes.

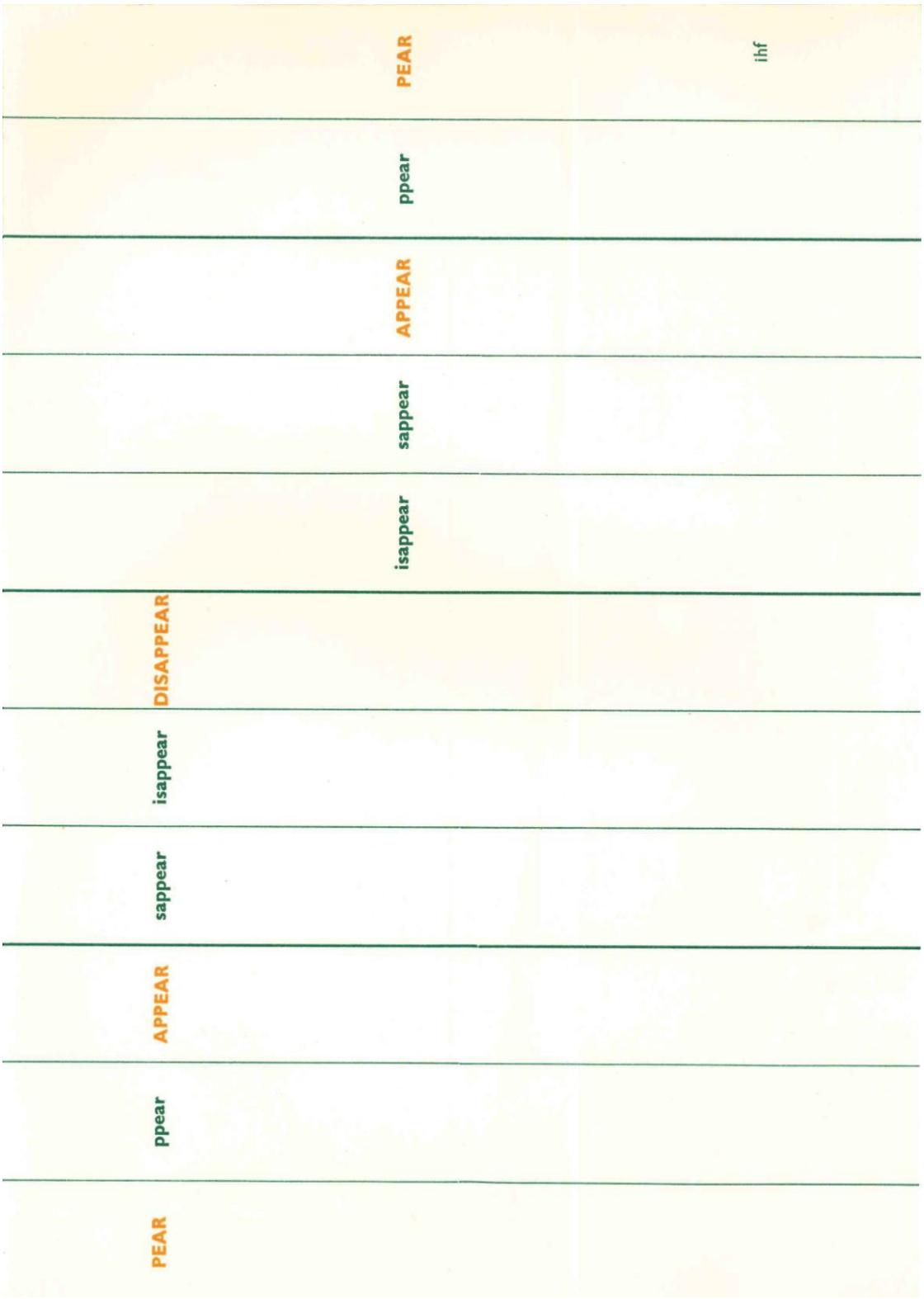



Fig. 11. [*Standing Poem 1: Pear/Appear*].

Turning to the second point, Finlay's next two standing poems – [*Standing Poem 2: Apple/Heart*] (1964); *Standing Poem 3: Hearts Standing Poem* (1965) – show him exploring the elementary conventions of independent visual expression. The first is a rectangular card with vertical covering flaps which, when pulled back, reveal a tryptich of white panels. In the central panel, two columns of Wittgensteinian red apples transform over four appearances into hearts, accompanied by a four-part phrase: "I/I lo/I lov/I love" (fig. 12). Again, the primary suggestion, putting aside romantic overtones, is the contingency of linguistic concept to material context: ideas in things; love as an apple. More pertinently for our purposes, the thematic duality between love and apple is established through a visual sequence independent of linguistic statement, using conventional pictorial symbols. *Standing Poem 3* similarly presages the re-separation of visual and linguistic effects, and the re-establishment of their conventional referential lexicons: another triptych, this one covered in blue and green hearts, whose individual pictorial connotations are established by an insert with visual and lexical key (fig. 13): a poem in itself. Again, note the classical inference – in an Aristotelian rather than concrete sense – of formal patterns between different species of phenomena: a heart-shaped pond, an owl's plunging brow-line, the v-neck of a jersey … These visual forms are not "bare linguistic structure", moreover, but independent operators in the establishment of meaning, admittedly granted more detailed qualities by linguistic suggestion. This use of visual effects as independent strata of poetic meaning, rather than nominally trans-referential addenda to language, was the root of what Bann calls Finlay's "transcendence of the sign through metaphor" ("Imaginary Portrait" 15), and thus of one aspect of his route away from concrete poetry. That such features were integrated into his work well before that avowed rupture suggests that this development in and of itself was less significant than his subsequent realisation of its aesthetic potentials and consequences.

That realisation comes across in a certain ironic detachment from what Abrioux calls the "synaesthetic fantasies of early modernism" in subsequent works like *4 Sails* (1966), in which even the titular *4* is a picture (*Homage to Ian Hamilton Finlay* 10). This poem (fig. 14) comprises a red folding card whose inner pages are divided by diagonal folds into four triangles: images of sails, as Bann notes ("Imaginary Portrait" 14-15). Each contains a phrase, type-set by Edward Wright, built up around Scottish port-codes highlighted in

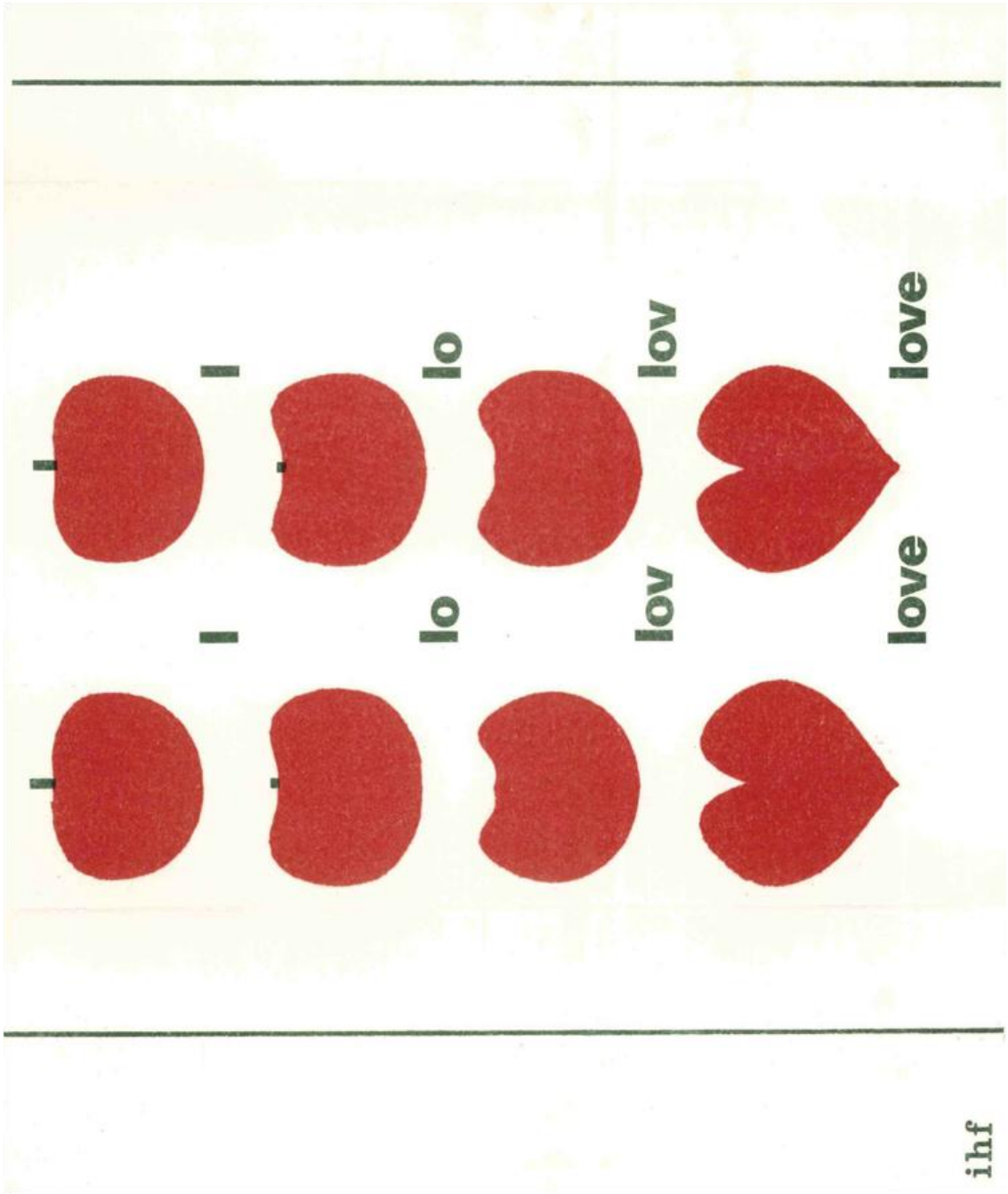
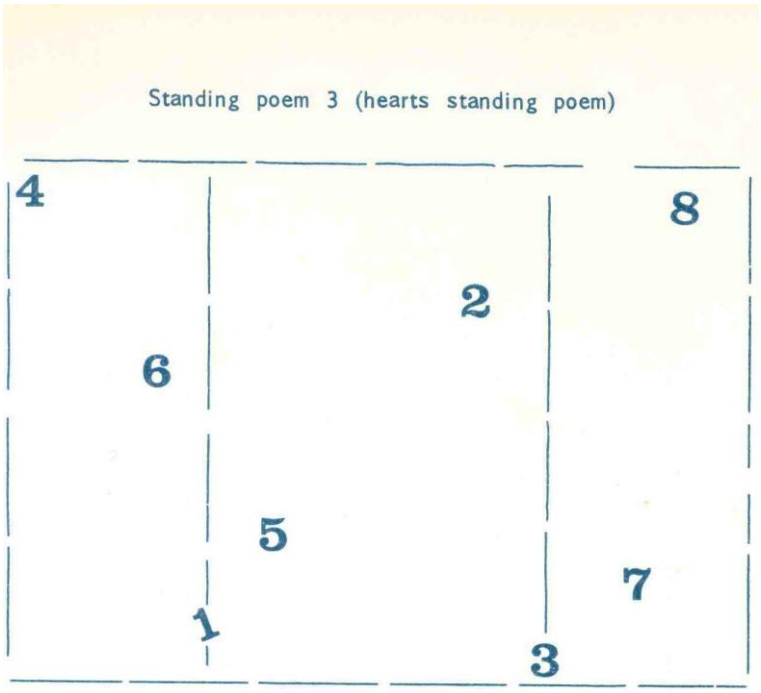



Fig. 12. [*Standing Poem 2: Apple/Heart*].



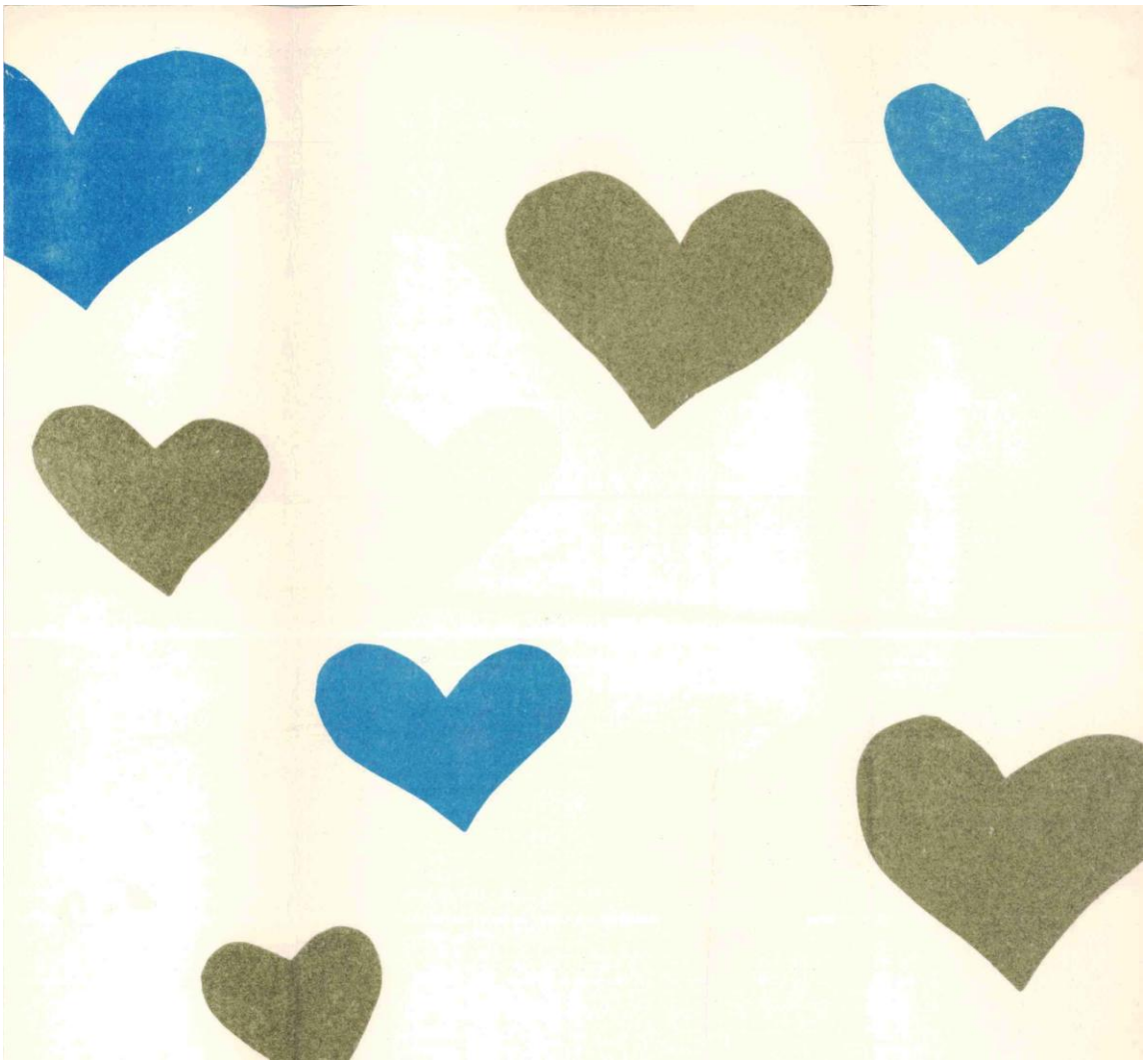

key -

1. little heart
2. wooden heart
3. pond heart
4. owl heart
5. jersey heart
6. umbrella heart
7. bobbin heart
8. end heart

ian hamilton finlay
wild hawthorn press

yedolie, with love from Jan

Fig.13. Key and (overleaf) detail from Edwin Morgan's copy of *Standing Poem 3*.



descending capitals. The port-codes' neologisms mimic those of contemporary sound or sonic concrete poetry, but subtly transfigure its abstruseness in their (literally) coded meanings, which are metaphorically brought to the surface by the picturesque or unsettling phrases into which they are worked. To Stanford (October 23, 1967) Finlay commented: "the concrete poets who are pleased by AZ, bore me, and I much prefer FR or BCK, because they stand for ports and are worn by fishing boats. That is to say, I like the point where systems and worlds impinge". A subtle critique is mounted of the idea that the world of conventional symbolic reference could be transcended through a "de-realising" aesthetic system. Although in this case the medium primarily at stake is sound, other card-poems endow visual arrangement with equally romantic referential value: as poppy heads in the *Sea*

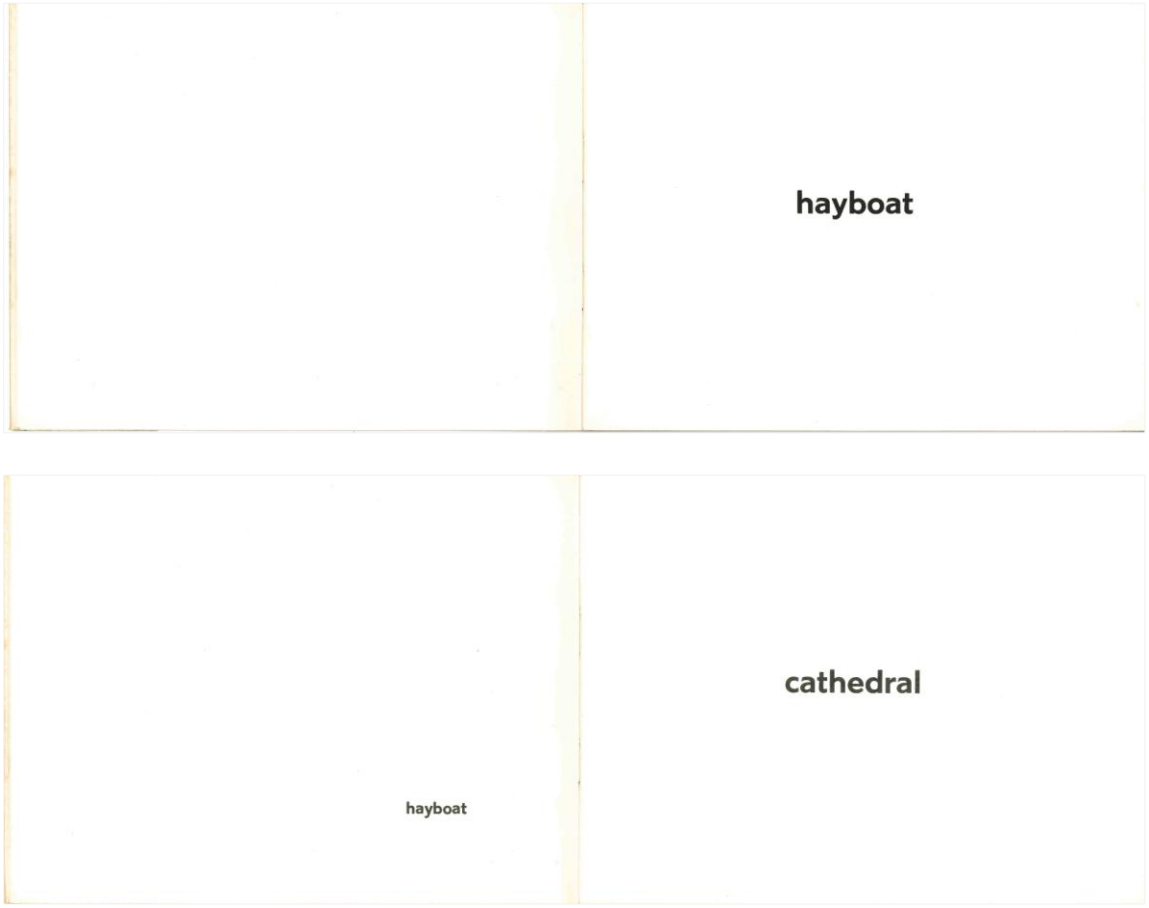

Fig. 14. *4 Sails* ([2-3])

*Poppy* series of 1966-68; a silver lightning bolt of para-rhyming words in the Masefield homaging *Star/Steer*.[21] But such transformative gestures are not just coded critiques of the blind-spots of avant-garde poetics: rather, by opening up the concrete poem to inherited systems of reference, they open it out onto an alternative thematic vista of fishing boats and sails, qualifying its formal rigour with a cautious romanticism, tempered by an awareness of the sailing boat as symbolist motif from Mallarmé to Puvis de Chavanne.

If Finlay's card-poems extended concrete poetry's visual dimensions, his booklet-poems explored the symbolic possibilities of the physical process of reading. By stretching poetry's medium boundaries in this way, they invite limited comparisons with contemporary "intermedia" art projects such as the "happenings" of Dick Higgins and Fluxus-associated North American artists. But these similarities only throw differences into sharper relief. According to Higgins's conception of the happening, for example – outlined further in my final chapter – the intervention of one medium into another was a means of collapsing psychologically ingrained delineations between forms of aesthetic experience, emblematic of the culturally ingrained values which perpetuated socio-economic hierarchies. Finlay parodied the idea in his "3 Happenings", a pointed contribution to Williams's anthology, published in America by Higgins's Something Else Press. Formed from three variants of the phrase "the little leaf falls/ the little fish leaps", it is accompanied by an annotation: "Are happenings sometimes wearisome? This is a *plein air* or out-of-doors one. A leaf falls, a fish rises. The breeze blows, the river ripples. It is all, as they say, happening—and not only once, but again and again". With typical faux-naivety, Finlay places compositional methodologies intended to liberate expression from social etiquette in the vaster context of natural behavioural cycles, suggesting the rootedness of human culture in something far more trenchant than etiquette. In this context we can assess the precisely and pre-emptively correlated multi-media effects of his booklet-poems, which invite the complementary alignment rather than inward crumbling of the senses, connoting a scepticism of counter-cultural notions of psychological and socio-cultural revolution.

A booklet-poem is distinguished from a booklet of poems in that a single verse is spread across its pages, and that turning those pages divides discrete phases of engagement, and itself becomes a carefully solicited element of the reading process, which is thus

rendered tactile as well as semantic, sonic and visual in emphasis. Again, such works were almost coeval with Finlay's concrete phase: his *Canal Stripe Series 3* was published in 1964, presumably after two abandoned prototypes. Its linguistic component comprises the three portmanteau words "haystack", "houseboat" and "windmill", and the lexically indivisible "cathedral". Over the first eight rectos, two sequences of neologisms are created by attaching the second syllable of each portmanteau to the first of the preceding, the unchanging "cathedral"' inserted after the first word of each cycle. Here is the first:



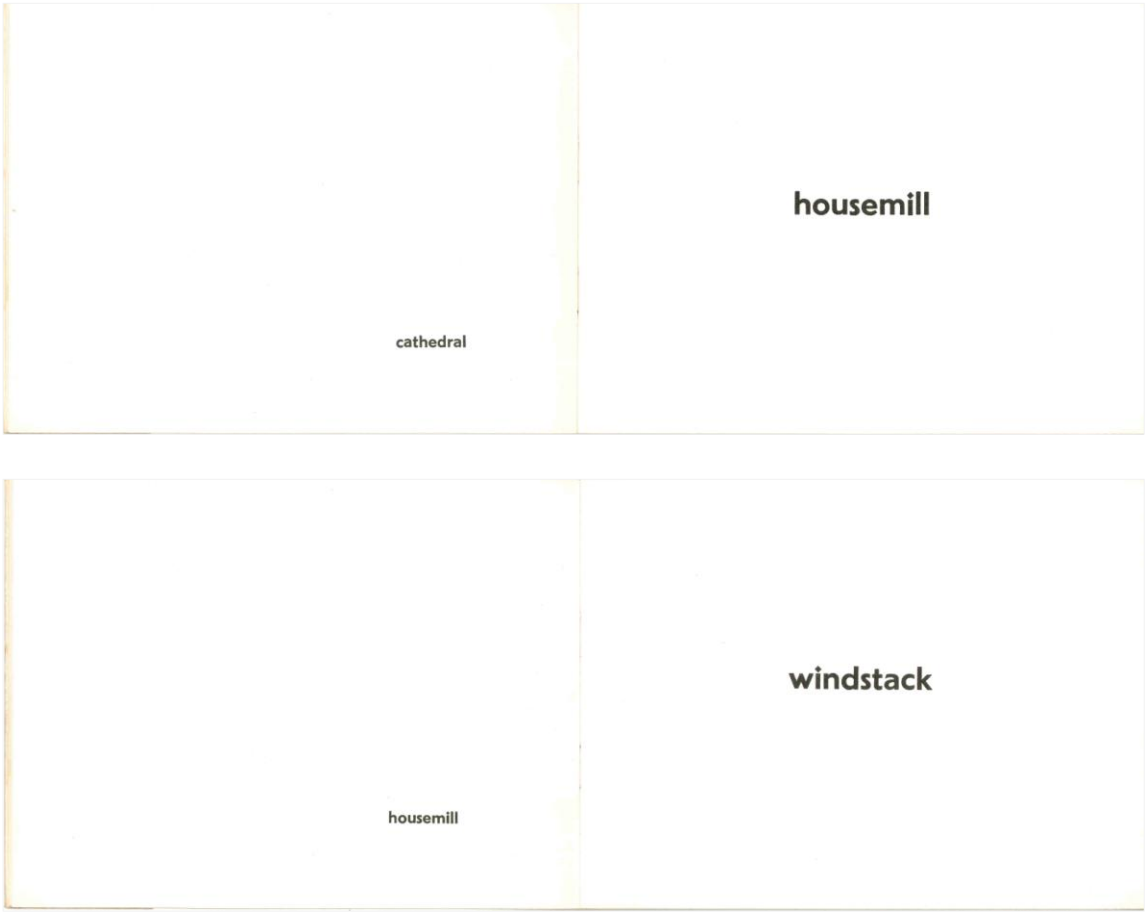



Fig. 15. *Canal Stripe Series 3* ([6-13]).

A perennial Finlayan theme of formal echoes between different elements of a landscape is thus established, enhanced by the new spiritual overtone suggested by the constancy of the religious edifice among shifting structures; given the landscape's Dutch associations – probably memories of Finlay's travels in Holland with the non-combatant corps – this also suggests the spires' visibility from multiple points on a landscape of long horizons. Complementing this verbal effect is a precise visual register: each term, after first appearing, reappears in reduced size on the following verso. The reader is thus metaphorically transported along the canal, objects homing into view as their craft approaches, then receding as another draws near. Crowning this combination of sensory effects is a physical analogy: turning the page becomes the stroke of an oar, a further propulsion along the water. The metaphor of the water-bound journey is endowed with a final sense of

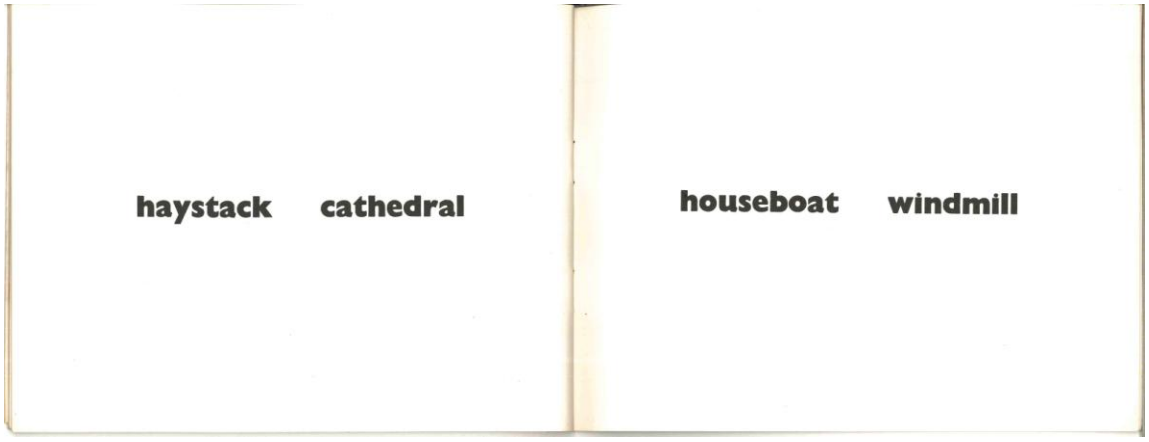



Fig. 16. *Canal Stripe Series 3* ([28-29])

emotional resolution over the last four double-spreads, as the phrase corrects itself ("haystack … cathedral … houseboat …" [23-27]), the final word of the righted sequence preceded by the other three over a closing double-spread in a crescendo of bold font. While this tactile augmentation of the reading process is new and prescient, the precision with which each sensory dimension of that process is thus enfolded is far from the spontaneous felicities of the happening.

In 1965, Finlay published the second and third of his *Ocean Stripe Series* booklets, again presumably following an abandoned first installment. The latter combines an exemplary homonymic linguistic sequence with a beautifully executed visual allegory: in the bottom right of its first four thin, white pages, the word "ark" is printed in small black font, suggesting a vessel becalmed on a Mallarmé-esque ocean of page-space. Over four page-turns the increasingly translucent surface lets through more and more colour from an as yet unrevealed source, until the last is peeled back, revealing four sheets extending from the spine in white, yellow, red and blue, visible as a single colour spectrum. At the top of the thinnest, white column, the word "ark" has transformed into "arc"; by inviting linear engagement, the booklet-poem is uniquely able to generate such moments of revelation. A newly pronounced Christian overtone is consolidated by an insert recounting Noah's final respite: "I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth". Again, visual, verbal, and tactile effects are dexterously integrated: neither the transformation from "ark" to "arc", the closing colour spectrum, nor the sequential

logic of the shifting frames would take on such clear symbolic associations without their envelopment by the others. The most virtuosic of these associations is generated by the turn to the final white page which, with the rainbow permeating it most clearly, is transformed from an image of sea into sky.

Besides the tactile dimensions of reading inaugurated by these booklet-poems, from the mid-1960s they also began to integrate more ambitious visual effects, for which Finlay increasingly relied on collaborators, such as Hamish Glenn's Salamander Press (Bann, personal interview). Such collaborations, foretokening Finlay's use of skilled craftsman to realise ambitious three-dimensional projects, are significant for several reasons. Firstly, professional production values clearly set Finlay's work apart from the dadaish "D.I.Y" micro-publishing philosophy, aided by photolithography, with which concrete poetry in England and Scotland was increasingly associated. Outsourcing the work's realisation to a paid third party also removed any residue of implied expressionism from the process and, as Bann notes in his "Imaginary Portrait" and "Poetic Universe" articles, established a dialectical interplay between the creative input of poet and craftsman. Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, the involvement of skilled artisans allowed Finlay's poems to be realised in a potentially limitless array of material forms.

Bann describes *Autumn Poem* (February 1966) and *Tea-Leaves and Fishes* (1966) as the "triumphs" of Glenn's involvement (personal interview, January 10, 2011). The former poem's horticultural theme is new and prescient, particularly given its composition after Finlay's spring 1965 move from Edinburgh to Gledfield Farm in Ardgay, Rosshire, the site of his first sculpture-poems. Visually speaking, Bann notes, "it was by far the most complicated thing he'd done … with transparent pages and black-and-white photographs" (ibid.). The incorporation of photography was a logical extension of Finlay's increasing sense of the independent function of visual gesture within the concrete poem.

*Autumn Poem* is a square booklet with an earth-brown cover, containing a series of black and white photographs by Audrey Walker fronted by sheets of transparent paper, on which appear perpendicular lines of text reminiscent of Robert Lax's 1950s poetry. This sequence of double-layered text-image frames retains something of the integration of language and visuality characteristic of previous works. The first two pages are identical, a

square photo backing the phrase "turn/-ing/ o-/ ver/ the/ earth/." The theme of horticultural cycles is complemented by an image of ploughed soil speckled with fallen leaves. Through repetition, the phrase comes to represent cyclical processes more generally, enhanced by the emphasised circularity of isolated *o*s and full-stops, and the monosyllabic rhythm implied by line breaks. "Turning over" the second page – an activity itself rendered allegorical – we find this theme nuanced by the reversal of the stanza:

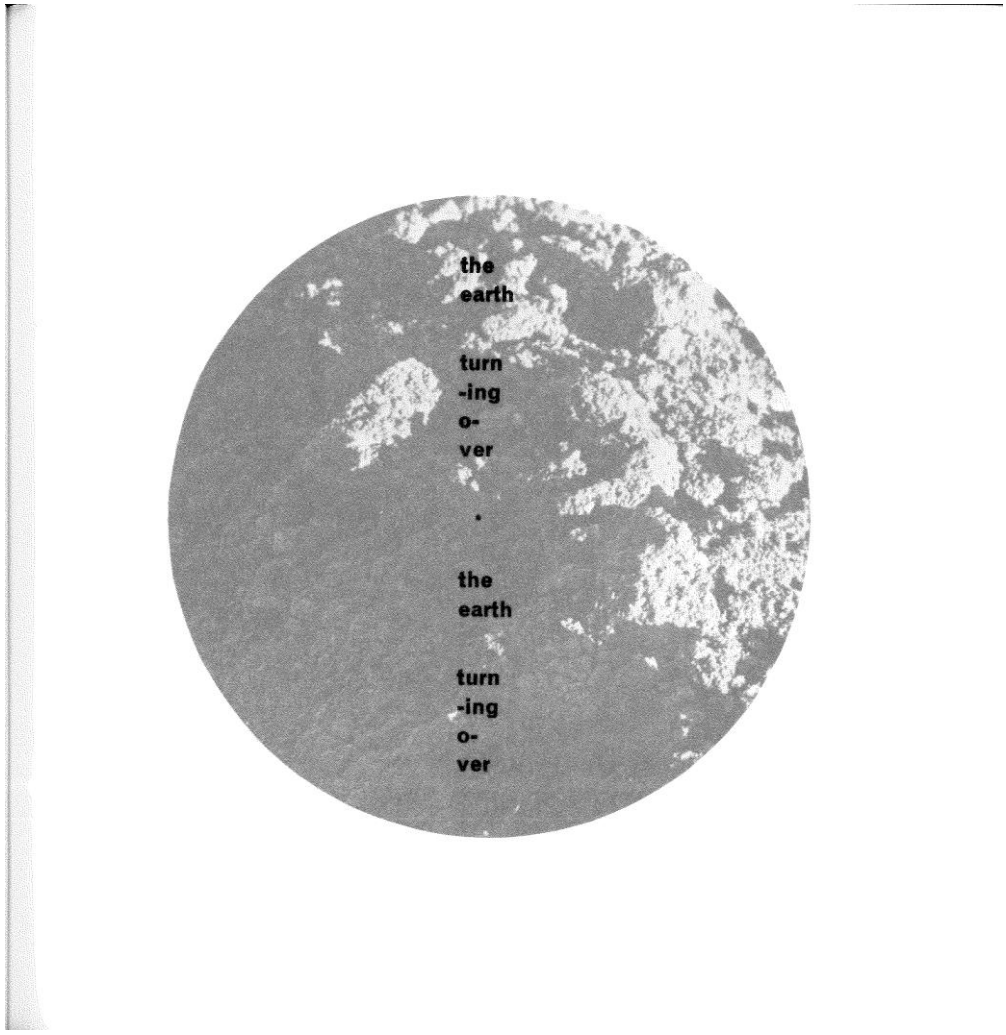



Fig. 17. *Autumn Poem* ([13])

This time the photograph, circular and half in shadow, suggests a planet lit by the sun, duly distending the meaning of the word "earth" by visual metaphor: the churning of soil in an allotment comes to allegorise the cycles of growth and decay by which the entire planet is animated. This rendering of thematic duality through formal duality reflects both Finlay's sense of horticulture as a means of "distilling ethical value", and a related emphasis on wisdom forged in isolation indicative of his increasing physical detachment from society (Bann qtd. in Abrioux *Visual Primer* 39).

Some of the shifting concerns manifested in Finlay's card and booklet-poems culminated in the fifth and final installment of his *Ocean Stripe* series, published by Tarasque Press, another new collaborator, in 1967. This work makes extensive use of photography, while the detachment of its visual and linguistic elements reveals a new sense of the aesthetic consequences of that separation, related to a newly pronounced scepticism regarding concrete and sound poetics. As Bann noted in a dedicated article, it thereby constitutes "both criticism and poetry" and "places the whole of his earlier work in a new perspective" ("Ian Hamilton Finlay's *Ocean Stripe 5*" 52).

Although it exploits the same port-code-sound-poem link-up as *4 Sails*, this piece does not work the port-codes into poetic strophes, but maintains their original placement on the hulls of fishing boats, photographs of which, cut from *Fishing News,* appear on each of its thirteen pages. Alongside each is a phrase lifted from a critical statement on concrete or sound poetry by Kurt Schwitters, Ernst Jandl or Paul de Vree, originally printed in *Form*. One early frame juxtaposes the maxim "The basic material is not the word but the letter" with a picturesque image of a fishing trawler cutting through calm waters, port-code visible. As the sequence proceeds, the images expand and diminish in size, enacting a struggle with the text to become the primary vessel of meaning: as Bann's article notes, the two are "not associated in harmony but in counterpoint" (49). This uncharacteristic friction between compositional elements suggests some sea-change in the scope of Finlay's work, albeit played out by the quintessential Finlayan analogy of the water-bound journey. One implication is the consolidation of his reappraisal of the relationship between image and text in concrete poetry, supplanting the integration of sonic and visual gesture into language with an offsetting of text and illustration. More broadly, this literary-visual counterpointing

*The basic material is not*
*the word but the letter.*


Fig. 18. *Ocean Stripe 5* ([11]).

seems to scrutinise the manifestos' impetuous syncretistic ambitions, muted by the vast, dumb ocean, and by the timeless circularity of human activity implied by the vessels' habitual journeys. As in *4 Sails*, alienation from "fashionable" aesthetic sentiment connotes an integration of picturesque imagery of boats and harbours. But the critique is not dogmatic: as the boats enter stormier waters, the statements become broader in scope, less ironically wielded: "It impossible to explain the meaning of art; it is infinite" ([29]). The relationship between the two resolves itself into a deeper congruence, suggesting the infinite need for aesthetic expression to symbolically navigate the brute ignominy of existence – a stormy sea – despite the fictive narratives of forward propulsion through which it must justify itself. The final effect is of equivocation rather than polemic. As Finlay remarked to Stanford (September 19, 1967), "I am gently satirising the sound poets. But again, the text MIGHT be taken seriously. And yet again, the boats are so dignified that the total effect cannot be neo-dada … perhaps the whole thing is really a poem about fishing boats, in a kind of triple-wrapping of semi-transparent disguise". An entire Kurt Schwitters poem appears on the last page, undermined and reinvigorated by its new "triple-wrapping" ([31]).

New Material Forms

By 1967, concrete poetry was at the height of its cultural prominence in England and Scotland. Bann's anthology – the only of the three major anthologies published in Britain – appeared early that year, while a slew of exhibitions followed Reichardt's show, notably the series held at Arlington Mill, Gloucestershire, and that which Bann curated for the 1967 Brighton Festival. The latter, documented in *POTH* 24, achieved unparalleled incorporations of concrete poetry into the urban landscape, as envisaged in early manifestos, displaying flag-poems by Gomringer and Claus Bremer outside the Royal Pavilion, Kenelm Cox's 30-foot sea-bound monument *The Three Graces*, and poems by Finlay set in stainless steel and concrete by the sculptor Henry Clyne.

Although such projects were indicative of his work's future direction, by 1967 Finlay was somewhat estranged from concrete poetry, at least from its manifestation in England and Scotland, feeling it had been commandeered by an artistic milieu too

uncritically wedded to the spirit of Dadaism. The first concretists, as Finlay saw it, had been recuperating the Dadaists' and Futurists' iconoclastic emphasis on language as brute material to a more constructive, historically-minded view of Western culture, by attaching contrasting associations of iconicity and objectivity to its visual-sonic-tactile grammar. On August 14, 1967 he commented to Stanford:

> [S]ome of the old delight has gone, partly because it has become fashionable (and has been taken up by some deplorable people), and partly because I always feel most enthusiastic when making fresh starts in a state of total innocence….Believe me, a few years ago, the concrete movement was a delightful one to belong to, for all the poets seemed to be gentle and erudite, interested in the past as well as the present – but this is no longer so.

Bob Cobbing, to whom Finlay sardonically dedicated a "Barking Fish-Carrier" in his 1969 *Boatyard* – presumably in reference to Cobbing's poem "Alphabet of Fishes" –, was probably one of the deplorable ones. Importantly though, Finlay primarily presents his increasing sense of alienation from concrete poetry as a matter of self-motivated stylistic development – a search for "fresh starts" – rather than ideological dispute.

In particular, by the late 1960s, he increasingly viewed his work in the context of architecture and landscape gardening. Bann's 1966 feature on his work in *Architectural Review* ("Concrete Poetry") reflected his burgeoning affinity with the architect: a technician rather than artist, whose work's ideological impetus entailed a direct endowment of physical space with cultural value, rather than parasitic critique. As Bann notes of this creative realignment, "architects are often very political but … in the sense that their decisions affect everybody, the world in general, in a way that the actions of artists don't....You can't, as it were, be a Dadaist architect" (personal interview, August 17, 2010). Of course, the manoeuvre reflected an abiding sympathy for the Noigandres and Gomringer, who had similarly aimed to endow language with the self-evident value of a building material. Finlay's association with gardening, however, was uniquely inspired by the models of eighteenth-century neo-classicist poet-gardeners like Pope and Shenstone, for whom the activity was a means of exemplifying – rather than referencing – aesthetic and ideological maxims.

Finlay's experiments with new material forms in fact predate this creative re-

alignment. Initially a means of augmenting rather than surpassing concrete stylistics, they were greatly aided by the larger physical canvasses he acquired after moving from Edinburgh to various rural farmsteads from spring 1965 onwards: first Gledfield, then Stonypath, Dunsyre in September 1966, after he had spent that summer in a smaller dwelling in Coaltown of Callange, Fife. At Ardgay, Sheeler notes, "Finlay began to produce toys on a larger scale, and his first works made for landscape were installed….Concrete poems made of coloured cork letters are stuck on the white harled walls of the house.…" (14). He also dug several ponds. Only at Stonypath did such projects come to stand for the creative re-contextualisation outlined above, as his first letter to Morgan from Dunsyre implies (October 3, 1966): "my feelings are getting more classical. The first big project I want to start is a very formal pond with wave/rock carved in stone, right across the end of it (as a low wall). I have been reading a lot of books on architecture and it's all very fascinating". Works in new material forms thus absorbed Finlay's shifting aesthetic and ethical concerns across the 1960s; his poster, glass, sculptural and landscape poems are considered below.

The poster-poem was an innovation of the Wild Hawthorn Press, though it followed Pierre Albert-Birot's unrealised 1910s plans for poem-prints. Poster-poems of Finlay's from 1963-64 were published in the calendar-format Jargon Press edition *The Blue and the Brown Poems*, while in his own *Poem-Print* series (1964-65), Finlay published Augusto de Campos, Stephen Bann, Franz Mon, Ferdinand Kriwet, John Furnival, and Albert-Birot himself. The first installment was Finlay's *Poster Poem* [*Le Circus*] (1964) which renders thematic duality through a formal duality largely involving an emphasis of the visual aspects of language, nonetheless reflecting a detachment from classical concrete method in its playful visual pictoriality.

*Le Circus* re-establishes a parallel between tug-boats and circus ponies previously explored in the poem "The Tug" and the short story "The Boy and the Guess", exemplifying the continuous roster of objects and associations called upon in Finlay's concrete and pre-concrete phases: " '[H]ere's a big hint to start with,' I said. 'This thing—that you've to guess—it's like a pony in this way, it is tied up with a rope when it is not in use' " ("The Boy and the Guess" 17-18);

> Where the fishers wait for bites
> Toots the little tug - in tights!
>
> Round each river bend and loop
> TOOT! - like through a circus hoop…. ("The Tug")

The poster-poem also builds up its comparison partly linguistically, setting the arresting statement "le circus!!" above the phrase "smack/ K47/ & crew", adjacent to the suggestive description "they/ leap/ BARE-BACK/ through/ the/ rainbow's/ hoop". But these quasi-metaphorical fragments are only consolidated by visual gesture: coloured lettering, free lineation and mixed fonts reminiscent of both Dadaist graphic verse and, as Bann noted in an article on the poem-print series, "the poster as a foretaste of events and performance" ("Poem-Prints" 8). The analogy is crowned by the black circle around the word "hoop", which transforms the semi-circular rainbow into the ringmaster's circular prop. In this visual-metaphorical context, abbreviated statements such as "also corks/ nets/ etc" evoke the truncated syntax of both parole in libertà and circus billboard. This visual consolidation of metaphor exemplifies both the realisation of thematic duality through formal duality, and the special attention granted to the visual dimensions of language itself after Finlay first discovered concrete method; although the bucolic nautical scene depicted already suggests a certain irreverence regarding its avant-garde "toughness".

Moreover, whereas mid-1960s poster-poems such as *Star/Steer* (1966) retain this work's emphasis on visualised language, later works utilise visual and linguistic signs as annotations for one another, as in the beautiful 1970 collaboration with John Furnival *Poem/Print No. 14*, a cross-section of a ship with lexical key. In general then, Finlay's poster-poems reveal the drift of his visual aesthetics away from strict concrete principles across the decade. Though they do not elicit the same tactile sensations as booklet or card-poems, the potential variations in distance and perspective afforded the reader by the intended wall-mounting portend the more extensive use of non-tactile yet physically oriented aspects of reading in the sculptural works considered shortly.

By summer 1964, Finlay had also commissioned his first sand-blasted glass poem from Michael Bartlett, a version of *To the Painter, Juan Gris* which, after appearing in the

"Changing Guard" *TLS*, was displayed at the concrete exhibition in Cambridge that November. Finlay's glass poems indicate a unique development of his concrete poetry's visual possibilities, emblematising language's conceptual self-sufficiency in a manner contrary to the establishment of thematic order through metaphor and inter-association so far prevalent. On June 3, 1966 Finlay wrote to Morgan: "if one stands them against the light, the area that is equivalent to the paper becomes a pearly floating space, while the letters - clear glass, washed with blue - shine softly....[in orig.] It is not mechanical, like electric-lighted or neon things, but more 'natural' ". The description suggests an essentially spiritually rooted faith in the kind of visual perception invited by the glass poem as a means of imbibing a truth beyond words, specifically via an engagement with *light*, emblem of cognitive illumination for Western theologians from Plato to Descartes. The glass poem also seemingly gained some association of expressive purity through interaction with the natural environment, in this case "natural" light; the medium was also unprecedented in twentieth-century poetry, a "fresh start", its purity undefiled by convention. Finlay's best-known glass poem *Wave/Rock* (1966) was composed, at least visually speaking, specifically for the medium, its graphic template cut up and rearranged by Finlay from Hansjörg Mayer's typescript.[22] This bespoke composition seems significant, given the unique thematic implications of the poem's visual-linguistic and physical form, sketched out below.

*Wave/Rock* is a poem set into a low, wide glass tablet, a two-tone horizontal colour spectrum running across its lettering, at least in the white-and-opal version purchased by Edwin Morgan after he saw a reproduction of the poem on the cover of Bann's *Beloit* anthology, now stored with his Scottish Poetry Library archive.[23] To the right, the word "rock" is repeated across five lines whose right-hand margins spread outwards as they descend, in pictorial approximation of their subject. To the left, a looser, mobile-seeming strand of colour is created from three lines of the word "wave". Looser internal spacing and an undulating upper surface – created by counterpointing the word across the two higher lines – make it equally visually emblematic, an effect complemented by the breaker-like *v*s and *w*s on the top line. This "wave" overlaps with the "rock" as if breaking over its surface, suggesting the apposite compound "wrack" and, with subtle diagrammatic accuracy, eroding its lower left-hand margins.

Clearly, the piece's visual dimensions complement the linguistic motif, but that motif is unlike other contemporary word-binary poems. In the Brighton Festival poem *Fisherman's Cross* for example (photograph in *POTH* 23 [4]), a phonetic echo between "seas" and "ease" indicates a qualitative echo between thing and quality. By contrast, the phonetic dissimilarity of "wave" and "rock" emphasises a qualitative tension between the liquid wave and the solid rock, heightened by their visual collision. In this context "rock" seems to stand for certain self-sufficient aesthetic and moral values, weathered but not shaken by the sequential "waves" of cultural epoch or discourse. The invocation of moral and emotional order is similar to that generated in other works of this period, but the means used to establish it are different, seemingly staked in faith rather than will.

Given the poem's partial creation for the medium, it seems that rendering in glass uniquely facilitated this expression of faith in absolutes, although more by nuancing than fortifying that sentiment. The flicker and movement within the stable body of the rock created by the refraction of light through its etched rear surface suggests some reconciliation of the notions of revolution and continuity which, once raised, seems supported by peripheral visual features: the blending rather than strict delineation of the colours corresponding to "wave" and "rock" – in Morgan's version – and the close, regular spacing of the lowest line of "waves", suggesting submerged stability beneath the water's – culture's? – surface-level tumult. The glass poem also instates physical movement as a vital aspect of reading, generating tonal variations dependent upon viewing angle.

Whereas poster and glass poems primarily extended Finlay's visual lexicon, his sculptural works endowed the concrete poem with a more pronounced physical presence, enhancing its associations of "object-hood", and supplementing its range of possible thematic gestures. Amongst the earliest sculpture-poems set in cork on the outside wall of Gledfield in 1965 were a third version of *To the Painter, Juan Gris*, and *Acrobats* (photographs in Sheeler 14), the latter previously printed in presciently "three-dimensional" font in the "Changing Guard" *TLS* (fig. 19). Unlike *Wave/Rock* or *Le Circus*, these and related works, such as the 15-foot column-poem *Ajar* which stood in the Gledfield stairwell, and the column-poem constructed by Furnival for the 1965 ICA exhibition – both referenced and reproduced in Bann's *Architectural Review* piece (309) – were generally reformulations of

existing poems.[24] As Cutts noted in his 1969 article, they thus reflect "less a question of what a poem should be made about, as what it should be made of in terms of the relationship of material to motif" (12). Such relationships might seem contingent to a poem's essential semantic and formal strata of meaning, but the subsidiary question which such projects raise is whether an existing poem in a new material setting is, in fact, a new poem. The capacity of sculptural rendering to fundamentally enhance the value of the concrete poem – both by extending an existing thematic metaphor, and through the less rationalisable quality of thing-ness with which it is thereby endowed – can be sensed in considering Finlay's wall-mounted version of *Acrobats*.

In two dimensions, "Acrobats" comprises two stacked text-blocks visible as a single rectangle, formed from the word "acrobats" repeated in zig-zagging blue and red lines. In the upper block the word is spelt downwards, in the lower one, upwards, so that they share their final *s*s in a central horizontal strip. The semantic association of dexterous play is mirrored by the mental and visual dexterity required to spot the word amongst nonsensical diagonals. This thematic parallel between mental and physical acrobatics, moreover, is only realised in mastering the piece's formal duality: moving from reading to looking. The invitation to play, and the elementary logical puzzle, meanwhile, suggest that the poem's ideal reader is a child, or at least able to become one.

The wall-mural form extended this association by mimicking the wall-murals in children's playgrounds. Indeed, as Bann noted in the *Architectural Review*, the poem was originally intended for a school-yard, in which context it would "tempt the eye to agility just as the playground invites the activity of the limbs" ("Concrete Poetry" 309). Surely, however, the wall-poem's non-symbolic physical dimensions were equally vital to its effect:the three-dimensional letters; the replacement of colour distinction with a distinction in colour, texture and protrusion to distinguish (letter)form from ground; the increased size of the visual-textual frame. Such qualities would have heightened the poem's sensory affectiveness in a manner hard to rationalise, only partly explicable by the heightened attention thereby focused upon its existing semantic and visual qualities, equally bound up with psycho-physical sensations beyond the scope of conceptual interface. A letter to George Mackay Brown (July 21, 1965) suggests Finlay's pleasure in the wall-poems'

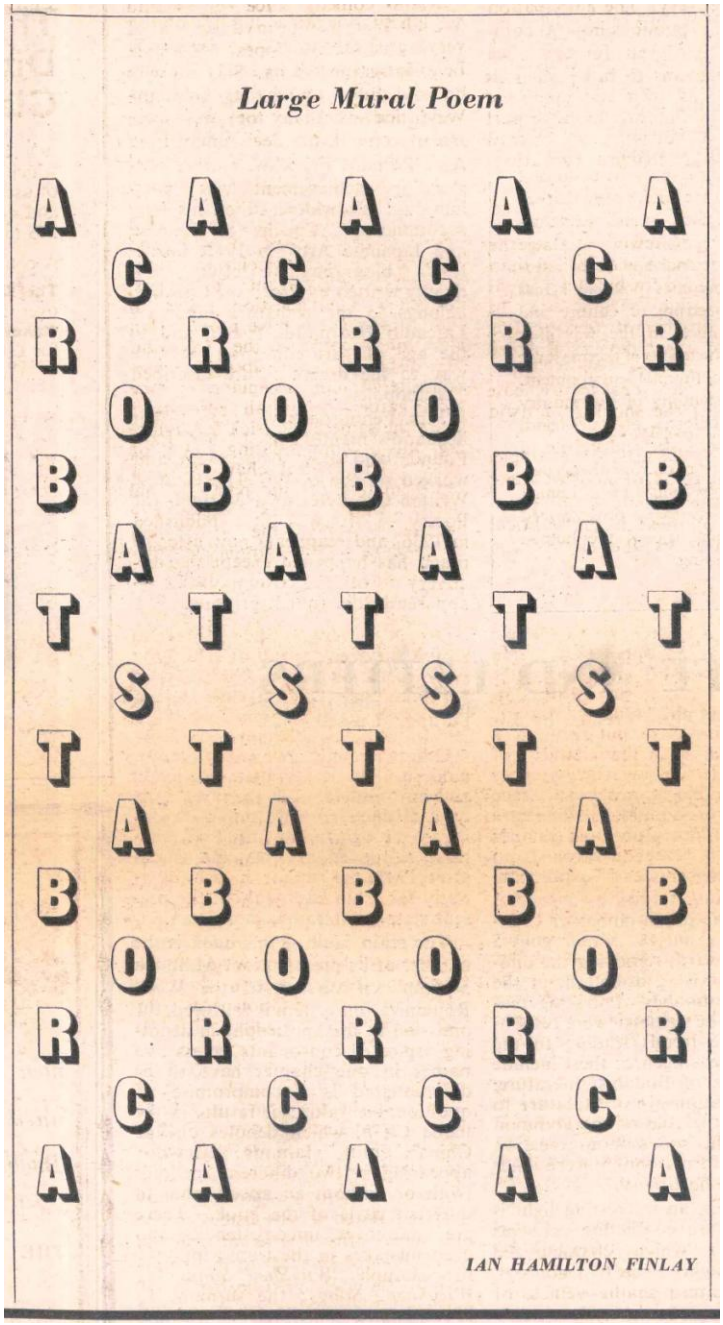



Fig. 19. "Acrobats". *Times Literary Supplement.*

"thing-ness" in sunny terms related to the play of light and texture: "[t]he sides of the house are rough-harled, so I made little plaster patches for each letter to sit on, and when the sun shines (when) there is this lovely effect of raised letters and shadows on the rough little white stones". But despite these cheerful associations, the poem's sheer physical presence is also related to the more visceral physicality of the great cod, bespeaking the material world's

resistance to the poet's plastered-on meanings.

Finlay's poem-sculptures granted his concrete style longevity through material reformulation just as his glass and poster-poems had through visual reformulation. But more than those other forms, they were also milestones on his route out of it, into an landscape of longer horizons punctuated by transformed aspects of concrete style. While continuing to deploy the symbolic and symbolically recalcitrant potentials of physical matter, from the late 1960s such works generally ceased to comprise materially rendered language-forms, instead becoming independent physical structures upon which linguistic statements were set or, increasingly, into which they were engraved.

To illustrate this shift, we can compare the poem-sculpture *Starlit Waters*, constructed in 1967 – part of the *Boat Names and Numbers* series first exhibited at Finlay's one-man show at the Axiom Gallery (August-September 1968) – with the *Four Seasons in Sail* sundial constructed at Stonypath the following year. *Starlit Waters* is a boat name constructed in three dimensions by an Edinburgh joiner: a two-and-a-half-metre-long sculpture of dark green painted wood, underlined by the thin blue wooden base on which it is set (*Tate Gallery 1974-6* 91-93). The name's synecdochic value in relation to the absent boat is enhanced by its rendering as a large wooden structure, and by the green fishing net around it which, as Bann notes, also connects the image with another, the titular firmament of shimmering stars above, by double-layered visual hint ("Poetic Universe" 81). The poem also appeals more directly to the senses: through distinctions in colour and texture, and through its sheer size and presence. Most importantly in this context, it is a large-scale realisation of a piece of language.


Fig. 20. *Starlit Waters.*

*The Four Seasons in Sail*, by contrast, comprises four phrases inscribed by Maxwell Allen along each side of a square marble sundial (fig. 22); a text-version was published in *Honey by the Water* (1973):[25]

**The Four Seasons In Sail**


Fig. 21. "The Four Seasons in Sail". *Honey by the Water*.


Fig. 22. *The Four Seasons in Sail*. Photograph by Christine Tudor ca. 1979.

The crux of this piece is the shared phonetic kernel of "seas" and "season", emphasised by the splitting up of the latter word, which inaugurates an analogy enhanced by each season's pairing with a boat-type. The sundial form enhances this theme: by marking time's passage; through the classical form's suggestion of timeless truths and, by metaphorical flourish, through the triangular gnomon's resemblance of a sail. There remains, however, a sensory presence to the engraved tablet which exceeds the cumulative effect of these symbolic gestures: in this sense, the piece is like *Starlit Waters*. However, this is not a three-dimensional poem, it is a poem set in a three-dimensional structure, whose function and cultural significance would inhere without it.

Registering this shift in the material form of Finlay's sculpture-poems is one way of mapping his route out of concrete poetry. An analogous route is suggested by the advent of the landscape poem. Tracking the early stages of this development, Bann noted that, besides those poems in which "a common form may serve as a link between two distinct

verbal expressions" – just as the net in *Starlit Waters* visually connects sea and sky – there is "a further possibility, where the fragment of language suggests a link between objects originally outside the 'poem', and in this way *formalizes* them" ("Poetic Universe" 80). In other words, Finlay's poems begin to implicate, and be implicated by, the surrounding landscape: particularly after his move to Stonypath. This development shifted Finlay's poetry definitively away from the material treatment of language itself towards the interaction of linguistic text and material context, simultaneously generating a vast palette of natural forms with which to "compose" it.

Bann's exemplar of Finlay's early landscape poetry is *Cloud Board* (photograph in Cutts 14), whose construction-in-progress he described to Derek Stanford (September 19, 1967): "I have spent today working on a new poem … a little wooden tub, in a circle of stones, and - by the tub - a board on which the word C L O U D appears, in white Rousseau-esque letters, plus 2 hands, rather Rene Magritte, one pointing up, and one down into the tub". The pointing hands render the cloud above, and its reflection below, signs for themselves, and for each other, by a simple attenuation of focus upon two specific parts of the landscape. The analogy was extended, Bann notes, "by planting two types of aquatic plant in the tub. The water-lily becomes a metaphor for the billowing cloud in summer, while the small white flowers of the starwort perform the same role during the winter" (80). This poem presages the grander scope of Finlay's later landscape works, both in "framing" subsistent features of the landscape, and in that landscape's physical alteration – through the planting of water lilies – to better serve the poem's theme. The adaptation of natural vistas to resemble paintings by Poussin and Lorrain in eighteenth-century English landscape gardening is a significant influence here.

*Cloud Board* is not a concrete poem in any easy sense: certainly not in the sense with which Finlay endowed the term. The concrete poem's nominal capacity to signify its own meaning without external contextualisation is contradicted by this poem's opening out onto the world in order to harness that meaning. It thus exemplifies the stylistic terms of his dissociation of his work from concrete poetry at around this time; however, the quality which such works retain, indeed enhance, from earlier poems is the ability to transfigure thematic parallel through a combination of language with material gesture. To move

through the linguistically inscribed environment of Little Sparta is to engage in a process similar to the sensorily augmented reading invited by concrete poetry, but realised on a far grander scale.

Finlay's period of conscious engagement with concrete was seemingly over by around 1967. Writing to Robert Nye on January 20, 1970, Finlay recounted the split in terms suggestive of both the cultural estrangement and stylistic realignment which had compelled it:

> Now that the 60s are over -- 'Concrete Poetry - A Movement of the 60's [sic.] -- one has a splendid feeling of being retrospective, and in a kind of chronological foreign country, where all is up to the New Lot (whoever they are)! Of course, I have made a special point of talking knowingly of Post- Concrete Poetry ever since about 1967 ... I am an 18th Century poet anyway, and not avant-garde in the least. Avant Cottage Gardener, is about my stretch.

Noting Finlay's refusal to contribute to *Mindplay* (1971) in his introduction to the anthology, John Sharkey relayed Finlay's assertions that "[h]e feels outside and uninvolved in what is happening now", and that "there are enough anthologies already" (16).

Marjorie Perloff's theory of concrete poetry as "arrière garde" rather than avant-garde is useful in considering Finlay's ultimate sense of the style's value. Concrete poetry, Perloff contends in a 2007 essay, consolidated the visually and sonically preoccupied linguistic projects of the early-twentieth-century by presenting them in condensed, self-reflexive forms. "The proposed dialectic":

> [I]s a useful corrective … to the usual conceptions of the avant-garde, either as a one-time rupture with the bourgeois art market … that could never be repeated – the Peter Bürger thesis – or as a series of ruptures, each one breaking decisively with the one before, as in textbook accounts of avant-gardes from Futurism to Dada to Surrealism to Fluxus, to Minimalism, Conceptualism and so on ("Writing as Re-Writing: Concrete Poetry as Arrière-Garde" n.pag.).

This sentiment chimes well with those expressed by Finlay, with an added ethical dimension, to Stanford on August 2, 1968: "the special contribution of concrete poetry is (for me) that it embodies the sense that the age of experiment (in general) is over, & that

the real problem in every area is to try to formulate, not a "wider" conception of reality ... but an idea of what a decent world might be".

Finlay's relatively swift ideological turn from concrete poetry as a socio-cultural phenomenon was not exactly synchronous with the more gradual stylistic drift of his work away from concrete practice as he had interpreted it: the other reason for that eventual split. This was perhaps because the former entailed a response to the appropriation of "concrete" principles by groups whose aesthetic, cultural and social imperatives he severely opposed, whereas the latter defined itself against the principles of poets for whom he retained respect, such as Gomringer and the de Camposes. It is worth finally re-emphasising, however, that the fundamental quality which Finlay's work accrued from contact with concrete – the generation of thematic duality through works of formal duality – continued to animate his art throughout the remainder of his career. Passing between the inscribed stone slabs, gnomons, bird-baths and watering cans of Little Sparta, one can everywhere sense the influence of that little note passed on by Edwin Morgan in 1962.

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[1] Bann associates this approach specifically with "biographical" explanations of those stages of development.

[2] Certainly, he is reminiscent of the "fair-haired and faunlike creature", impoverished and "a little pitiful", whom Derek Stanford recalled first encountering on military duty in Nottingham in 1946 in his memoirs (112).

[3] J.F. Hendry pointed out the *Sketches*' similarity to Finlay's stories in a letter to which Finlay replied: "I don't know, my story may be like Turgenev, because I have never been able to get hold of A Sportsman's Sketches, though I would dearly love to. But I have read his novel Fathers and Sons which I liked terrifically, and I think he is very classical…." (1955? Letter undated, estimate based on reference to submitting "Straw", published 1955, to literary journal). By the time he wrote "Lucky", Finlay had read *First Love* "By a candle/ In a whitewashed outhouse…."

[4] Estimate based on Finlay's reference to an article on W.S. Graham published in "9", a copy of which "Crombie showed me … (my own has not yet arrived)". The article is probably Edwin Morgan's "Graham's 'Threshold' ", from issue 2.2 of Peter Russell's *Nine*, published May 1950. Finlay calls the article "absurd", a "pseudo-obscurity": "Sydney's verse says nothing, is technically immature … emotionally childish". Despite his correspondence with Hendry, Stanford et al., the so-called "New Apocalypse" or "Neo-Romantic" milieux never provided the context for Finlay's early verse that they did for Morgan's; Finlay and Morgan met in summer 1961 (McGonigal 140). Transcripts of letters to Stanford from the 1940s-50s were kindly passed on by Stephen Bann.

[5] Transcripts of unpublished letters to Creeley, Lorine Niedecker, Guy Davenport and

George Mackay Brown were kindly passed on by Alec Finlay.

[6] The examples Artistotle gives of the third type are the phrases " 'Draining off the life with the bronze' and 'Severing with the unyielding bronze'; here 'draining off' is used for 'severing', and 'severing' for 'draining off', and both are species of 'taking away' "(ibid.).

[7] These Toy Fish, or a version of them, are stored with Houédard's John Rylands Library papers (photograph in Abrioux *Visual Primer* 2). The image is also presaged by a passage from "Fisher by the Stove" describing the protagonist's fishing fly: "I showed him a minnow I had made from a tin, more for fun than for fishing with,...I had not been able to resist the temptation of painting it up in bright, useless colours" (22). In a later sculpture-poem, the phrase "tin fish" assumes the warlike connotations common to Finlay's post-1960s work, as "the slang name given to early torpedoes" (Sheeler *Little Sparta* 51) in a birdbath epitaph to the First World War schooner the Little Secret: "Here, a tin-fish in her hold/ Lies the *Little Secret*, told." (qtd., ibid.).

[8] Estimated date based on the undated letter's Edinburgh address, and reference to trips to "the clinic", probably the Davidson clinic which Finlay was visiting around that time.

[9] Estimate of latter period based on information in letters to Turnbull at the National Library of Scotland, the former more speculatively upon references in various letters.

[10] The context is acknowledged by Finlay's denunciation in "The Writer and Beauty" of "the posh Lie" which "struts in the social air", "Part of the analyst's neurosis". This poem is sardonically dedicated to two analysts, including the Davidson Clinic's director Winifred Rushforth. "These are two people I detest, and I hope the poem slays them", Finlay wrote to Turnbull (July 8, 1960).

[11] By July 1960, Finlay had published three poems – all subsequently included in *The Dancers* – in the seventh issue of *Migrant*, whose internationalist ethos influenced *POTH*. More poems, and an anonymously printed fragment from a letter referring to Russian and Scandinavian literature which Stewart Smith, in a forthcoming article, reveals to be Finlay's, appeared in the final issue later that year.

[12] Letters to Turnbull are dated by post-mark, except letter of 27 August [1960], dated by Finlay.

[13] Untitled poems are entered in works cited list by first line.

[14] This poem was added in the contentious expanded 1969 Fulcrum Press edition.

[15] This poem first appeared in the 1969 edition.

[16] On the conference, see Bartie and Bell. The transcript of Trocchi and MacDiarmid's confrontation is in Campbell and Niel (154-57), along with Trocchi's lecture transcript on "The Future of the Novel". On the conflict generally, see McGonigal (140-53). Morgan discusses the issue in the broader context of Scottish poetry since the eighteenth century in "The Beatnik in the Kailyard" (1962). The fourth issue of *New Saltire* (Summer 1962) captures the mood on both sides of the conflict, containing, amongst other things, a book review used by Finlay to criticise the insularity of post-MacDiarmid Scottish literary culture ("The Scots Literary Tradition"), and Maurice Lindsay's "The Anti-Renaissance Burd, Inseks an Haw", which castigates the "anti-renaissance" movement for petulance and shallowness.

[17] *Glasgow Beasts* is treated as a single-poem publication.

[18] Also see the watercolour drawings in Janet Boulton's *Some Early Toys by Ian Hamilton Finlay*

(2009).

[19] A letter dated July 9 reveals that he has obtained Gomringer's address from Augusto.

[20] "The Pond of Oo Farm (Rousay)" (1962) is unusual as a pre-concrete poem fundamentally pre-occupied with the visual qualities of graphemes.

[21] Originally printed in *Form* (1966; "Star/Steer"), *Star/Steer* was adapted to its better-known typographical format, with reduced spacing between lines and key words emphasised by wider leading, by Edward Wright and students from Chelsea Graphics School, for Bann's *Six Concrete Poems*, a selection of post-card-poems in an envelope published for the 1967 Brighton Festival. This version was published as a poster-poem with silver font on dark grey background by Tarasque (1968).

[22] A version set in a diagonal line from 1963-64 was included in *The Blue and the Brown Poems*. The pond-side poem mentioned to Morgan never materialised, but another version of *Wave/Rock* was constructed in concrete for a 1969 exhibition in Pittencrieff Park, Dunfermline (photograph in Cutts [15]).

[23] *Wave/Rock* was actually commissioned in three colours, "white flashed opal", "blue plate" and "clear", as revealed by the estimate from T & W. Ide Glassworks (June 16, 1966; see "T and W Ide") stored with Finlay's Lilly Library manuscripts. I am grateful to Stephen Bann for this reference.

[24] The *Scotsman* article "Concrete Poems" (April 30, 1966) contains images of the Gledfield versions of *Acrobats* and *To the Painter, Juan Gris,* and a version of *Canal Stripe Series 4* (1964) on a triangle of fence posts, with useful glosses by Finlay. All the poems were constructed by Jessie McGuffie's new partner Dick Sheeler; the two lived with Finlay and his new collaborator Susan Swan at Gledfield until March 1966 (Sue Finlay "Notes from a Working Life").

[25] For photographs of the poem in situ see Sheeler 53-54.

Off-Concrete: Edwin Morgan

Edwin Morgan probably began writing concrete poems at some point in 1962. The correspondence with international concrete poets, especially the Noigandres, stored with his Glasgow University papers, documents his interaction with the concrete movement worldwide, while his avowed creation of concrete poetry continued for longer than Finlay's; although Morgan too retrospectively bracketed the period, more roughly and less symbolically,[1] assigning it in a letter to Peter Day, for example (March 10, 1987), "mainly to the 1960s and 1970s, and especially to the period from 1963-70".

My definition of Morgan's concrete poetry hinges around his own term "off-concrete", coined in the title of his 1963 poem "Canedolia: An Off-Concrete Scotch Fantasia". I take this term to denote Morgan's combination of certain visual and sonic features associable with classical concrete – those rendering the "cool authorial hand" he described in interview with Marshall Walker ("Let's Go" 57) – with a range of other poetic devices designed to adapt those features to specific communicative purposes. This seems to reflect a belief that the value of any poetic style was contextual rather than innate: dependent upon representing specific types or instances of communication – everyday or fantastical, real or imagined – rather than the kind of universal tangibility invoked in early concrete manifestos. They were justified to some extent by Morgan's sense that concrete's "visual and sonic gestalts" were "in embryo in all poems" anyway ("Statement by Edwin Morgan" 69).

Practically speaking, this resulted in his development of various subcategories of concrete poetry – from the pictorial to the permutational or "emergent" poem, from the found poem to the exaggerated dialect sequence – designed to address various specific communicative scenarios. The range of such scenarios was wide, but many were set in worlds beyond the conventional parameters of human experience, exploiting concrete poetry's capacity to transgress stereotypical "human" grammar: the animal kingdom, for example, or extraordinary environments extending the scope of human communication itself, notably outer space. The same mercurial quality meant that concrete poetry was only ever a limited aspect of Morgan's work, one of various types of poem developed from the early 1960s onwards to similarly diverse ends: found, sound, science fiction, "instamatic", "social", etcetera.

A related characteristic of off-concrete poetry was the integration of avowedly subjective, even polemical authorial stances, which seems to reflect a belief that just as poetic value was contextual, it must also inevitably manifest subjective perspective, rather than the trans-subjective veracity implied in classical poetics. By the terms of those poetics, this perhaps undermined concrete poetry's social function by making its expressions partial, prejudicial; but in Morgan's verse, social function only ever derives from some such subjectively invested ethical or political stance. This aspect of his concrete poetry partly facilitated an attempt to reflect specifically Scottish scenarios and agendas.

This definition does not so much challenge a critical consensus as counter the general lack of close attention paid to Morgan's concrete work: those engaged accounts which have appeared in fact predicate my overarching assumptions. Taking these points in turn, the general oversight might seem surprising, given Morgan's canonical status within late-twentieth-century Scottish and British-Irish poetry, but is arguably explicable because of the resultant terms of his work's reception. It tends, that is, to be celebrated for the emergence by the late 1960s of a wide-ranging, erudite, but ultimately "humane" and "approachable" lyric voice. Within this paradigm, more idiosyncratic or opaque techniques – among which concrete is pre-eminent – tend either to be rejected as relatively "inhumane" and "unapproachable" or, more commonly, gestured towards approvingly as proof of that voice's democratic breadth without being subject to the kind of detailed analysis suggesting self-sufficient interest.

The former sentiment is exemplified by Maurice Lindsay's 1970 assessment: "[o]ne may not feel that this particular *genre* is anything more than a passing fashion, with its limited possibilities for reverberation and satisfaction" ("Morgan, Edwin (George)" 777); and in Jack Rillie's assertion, in an essay on Morgan's criticism, that although poems employing metaphors of scientific process might feasibly freshen perception of their object, concrete poetry – which often does so at a structural level – is "in deep shadow" in this regard (114). Rillie posits a "technological determinism" engulfing "the materials and forms of art", implying that Morgan's "Pelagian" faith in concrete's scientistic structures sacrificed his poetry's human essence (ibid.). The absence of a dedicated essay on concrete in *About Edwin Morgan* (1990), in which Rillie's article appears, and still a vital scholarly introduction, itself suggests a lack of serious critical appetite. It is most favourably discussed in Geddes Thomson's contribution on

"Teaching Morgan" (to children), partly for its pedagogical value in raising the "question of what is poetry and what is not" (127). One can sense the latter implication in Robert Crawford's praise of Morgan's "willingness to take on board, examine, and redeploy new ideas and techniques without becoming enslaved by them" – a comparison to slavery again implies the "inhumaneness" of experiment – (24); and in Kenneth White explaining Morgan's concrete experiments partly by asserting that "Morgan is a 'try anything once' man", adding that "too much of this would be marking time" (33).

More empathetic and engaged responses have of course appeared, focusing either on the capacity of Morgan's concrete poetry to represent extraordinary communicative scenarios, or its political and ethical commitments. Robin Hamilton's *Science and Psychodrama: The Poetry of Edwin Morgan and David Black* (1982) exemplifies the former position, contending that both Morgan's concrete and science fiction poetry gauge the mutation of language in transformed sensory environments, chiefly intergalactic. For Morgan, Hamilton argues, "time, life, reality, are … always part of a dialectical process, the clash of stasis and energy, change", a process "always … intimately connected with language" (36). Rather than nullifying habitual linguistic values, the "interference" of new environments, "which shatters or at least disturbs our normal patterns of conception and communication", can renew them, by altering language's outward forms: become "the starting point … for a poem – as a workman's repeated inability to spell 'begun' generates the concrete poem 'O Pioneers!' "(38). In similar spirit, Eleanor Bell's "Experimenting with the Verbivocovisual" (2012) ascribes to Morgan's concrete, like his non-concrete verse, the compulsion to access a wide range of "mindscapes", "human or otherwise (including animal, insect, computer and alien!)" (116).

Colin Nicholson's *Edwin Morgan: Inventions of Modernity* (2002) typifies the latter position. Placing Morgan's concrete techniques at the fulcrum of his 1960s stylistic revolution, Nicholson refers to poems such as "Starryveldt", "elegising victims of the Sharpeville massacre", as "activist intervention[s] into the form", connecting this activism to a reactivation of semantic statement (91): "[c]ustomarily trangressing the relative structural purity concrete called for, Morgan links disruptive specificity with narrative, percolating image into concrete to connect visual effect with semantic transmission" (92). This "semantic mobility" is in turn associated with the subversive role of sound in the concrete poem, a "playing with assumed separations" of mediums

which also resists structural purity (95). For Nicholson, this eschewal of "homogenising motives" is connected to Morgan's recognition of the specific imperatives of a Scottish concretist: his "registering the reality of Scotland" (98).

This chapter, as well as responding to the relative scarcity of interest in Morgan's concrete poetry, takes its cue from such responses, assessing more fully the range of scenarios with which off-concrete interlocks, and the range of shapes it assumes to do so, paying attention to the activist and nationalist tones surfacing throughout. I assess Morgan's concrete poems by formal type, but in doing so have occasionally had to abandon chronology, as Morgan tended to be developing and using several such types at any one time. This in itself reflects his sense of concrete poetry's contextual rather than innate value and, though my structure tends to obscure it, should be borne in mind throughout as a marker of his aesthetics and ethics.

I begin by acknowledging the relative dearth of proto-concrete technique in Morgan's pre-1962 poetry, but also some of the expressive imperatives evident within it to which concrete poetry responded. I then consider the clearer presentiments of concrete style and theme in his unpublished scrapbooks, composed 1932-65. Turning to Morgan's discovery of classical style, I assess his interest in its positive appraisal of modern communication – by recourse to his engagement with Marshall McLuhan – and in its foreignness of form and origin, qualities appropriated to set his poetry apart from both Scottish and English precedents, thereby defining a progressive Scottish poetics. I then assess Morgan's earliest concrete poems, mainly from *Starryveldt* (1965), which indicate an initial wariness regarding classical style: comic picture poems evoking the expressions of animals, which contextualise classical concrete grammar to query its asserted capacity to express universals, and "computer poems" in which the ideal of non-subjective expression is critiqued. Balancing this inference, I assess Morgan's contemporaneous use of the typewriter as a visual tool, and his simultaneous plans for three-dimensional and poster-poems, as evidence of a more earnest engagement with classical principles. I then turn to various types of off-concrete poem developed from the mid-1960s-mid-1970s in which scepticism and enthusiasm appear resolved in the turning of classical grammar to contextual purpose, through the incorporation of theme, narrative and authorial perspective: permutational-esque poems, "emergent poems", "one word poems", and the non-pictorial animal-poem sequence *The Horseman's Word* (1970). The latter is also assessed as evidence of Morgan's use of concrete poetry to

express non-human communication, thereby opposing metaphysically or religiously inflected accounts of human thought and communication: one of the primary imperatives of his off-concrete style. Reading "Blues and Peal: Concrete 1969" as an elegy for concrete poetry in its visual incarnation, I turn to his coeval but longer-running engagement with its sonic possibilities, in light of the international growth of sound poetry, and the contemporaneous development of naturalistic Scottish poetry in dialect. I take Morgan's sonic concrete to denote an interest in "dialect" both in the practical sense – evident in 1960s-70s poems exploring Scottish and international languages – and as a quality of communication in transformed sensory environments, notably in his "spacepoem" sequence. As such, I take it to contextualise the effects of sound poetry in the same way that earlier off-concrete poems had contextualised classical concrete poetry, in the case of poems exploring Scottish dialect to record specifically Scottish sound-worlds. Space constraints prevent discussion of Morgan's "colour poems", which integrate hand-writing and painterly colour-combination into concrete style, published in *Sealwear* (1966)*, Bestiary* – Morgan's archived exhibit for the 1968 Apollinaire memorial exhibition Come Back Guillaume, All is Forgiven – and his 1978 poster-poem collection *Colour Poems*.[2]

Early Poetry and Scrapbooks

Little in Morgan's pre-1962 published roster suggests nascent concrete poetic tendencies. Collections such as *The Vision of Cathkin Braes* (1952), *The Cape of Good Hope* (1955) and *The Whittrick* (1973, composed 1961) partly reveal a tortuous lyric voice against which concrete poetry primarily defined itself by opposition. Given the "New Apocalypse" flavour of much of this early verse, however, we might see Dylan Thomas's pattern-poem homages to George Herbert as a nexus with influences on later work: describing concrete poetry in the built environment to Erica Marx (March 22, 1967), Morgan cited "Thomas's remark that he would like 'to build poems big & solid enough for people to be able to walk & sit about and eat & drink and make love in them'!" Moreover, whilst not presaging concrete style itself, these early poems do contain clues regarding the communicative duties Morgan would later assign it, particularly in expressing a desire for a poetic register freed from the grammatical

trappings of subjectivity, and from the apparently attendant spectre of religious morality; notwithstanding his later reintegration of subjective perspective into the concrete poem.

The single-poem publication *The Cape of Good Hope* is a case in point, opening on a first-person account of a disembodied consciousness passing out over stormy seas – W.S. Graham or Montale might be invoked – which seems to express a yearning to wrest cognition free from selfhood, to pass "Out from the heart and the spirit and humanity and love/ Over matter alone…." (3). This call is apparently answered in the second section, "Mid-Ocean", when a mysterious, autonomous life-force materialises in the narrator's field of vision:

> A gleam, an inhuman shimmer
> That is neither spirit of god
> Or demon nor lantern of ship
> Glides in inhuman beauty….(6)

This portent of "inhuman" consciousness heralds the disintegration of first-person narrative, inaugurating a series of stanzas depicting Da Vinci, Newton, Beethoven, Melville and Mayakovsky at moments of aesthetic or intellectual revelation. One implication of all these tableaux, as of the introduction, is that the destruction of the religiously engendered subject might be a catalyst to creative and intellectual epiphany, and that the disintegration of conventional subjective grammar might be one way of achieving or gauging that process. Morgan's description to Walker of concrete's "cool" authorial hand, "not deliberately baring its soul or its nerves or expressing something that gets at you emotionally", casts it as one possible realisation of the post-subjective voice Morgan sought ("Let's Go" 57).

In *The Whittrick*, another single-poem text, a godless grammar is more specifically envisaged in the guise of computerised language, an evocation to which Morgan's concrete poetry also responded. In the final of the poem's eight dialogues between artists, intellectuals and fictional characters, the neuroscientist Grey Walter unveils to Jean Cocteau a poetry-composing computer, appropriately named "The Whittrick":

> … programmed, elaborately
> And with great faith in the logic of choice, to find
> The end of every beginning, the probable

> Haystack in the open field of the possible
> And the needle of certainty this haystack holds….(40)

The Whittrick's abilities, Walter states, prove the rootedness of poetic composition in calculable material process – "the poem you write is already foreshadowed/ When you pencil the first warm phrase" (40) – disproving assignations of divine ordainment to authorship; although an allusion to Calvinist predestination counterbalances that implication, as if faith in the computer's infallible logic itself entailed a fatalistic metaphysics. An argument ensues, Cocteau asserting the inviolable ambiguity of creativity – "the poet is invisible" (41) – before the Whittrick itself finally addresses the pair in the language of Marlowe's Mephistopheles: "*Now Faustus, what wouldst thou have me do?*" (42). An inhuman language is thus invoked on a note of menace as much as liberation; but its centrality to Morgan's early poetic concerns is clear.

If these poems predict some of the tasks to which concrete poetry would be turned, its themes and forms are far more strikingly presaged in the sixteen extraordinary scrapbooks which Morgan compiled from 1932, when he was just eleven or twelve, until 1966. Unpublished, now archived, they are described by James McGonigal and Sarah Hepworth as "among his most significant early work" (3). The sheer range of linguistic and visual data they contain, and their shifting function – from photographic biography to cultural documentation to visual collage – guard against overly tendentious readings of style or theme, but images and information relevant to Morgan's concrete persona can certainly be picked out, as can evidence of prescient formal experiment.

In the first case, we must position this data within the scrapbooks' wider evolving thematic landscape. As McGonigal and Hepworth note, they "can appear to be an amalgam, a kaleidoscope, a random assortment", a tension partly resolved for these critics by a Surrealistic "deep relational structure" (5-6). However, a subtly shifting range of preoccupations can be inferred. We might note, for example, the gradual chronological supersession of medieval and renaissance art – particularly crucifixion scenes – by twentieth-century painting and sculpture; or of the poetry quotes littering the adolescent volumes by the newspaper cuttings – especially regarding atomic warfare and the space race – punctuating the books compiled in Morgan's thirties. A gradual

process of sexual self-assertion can also be charted across the increasing size and eroticism of male portrait shots. Other themes, such as animals, are ubiquitous.

Within this wide vista, data of obvious relevance to Morgan's concrete poetry – sometimes highly precise, sometimes more broad – can be identified. In the first case, *Scrapbook 15* (compiled 1959-65) contains a magazine photograph of "the entrance to the pilot [channel] tunnel on the English coast" dated 1960, bearing the Victorian workman's inscription used in "O Pioneers!": "THIS TUNNEL WAS BEGUBNUGN IN 1880 WILLIAM SHARP" (3223).[3] Slightly less direct a source is the text of the Scots ballad "The Blithesome Bridal", whose title is shuffled in the 1966 permutational poem "From an Old Scottish Chapbook", pasted into *Scrapbook 4* (1941-53; 570).

In the second case, the animal kingdom is a key concrete theme, while some linguistic snippets reflect engagement with the kind of topical context for grammatical idiosyncrasy which Morgan later explored through concrete: notably space travel. *Scrapbook 14* (1956-62) contains a *Daily Express* article from November 4, 1957 about Laika the dog's "space shot", above which stretches the headline "BLEEP-BLEEP, BLEEP-BLEEP", a reference to the "beep-beep" radio equipment which sent back punctuated auditory signals from early spacecraft (2782). The idea of these temporally and syntactically isolated sound-units clearly influenced the syntax of "Spacepoem 1: From Laika to Gagarin".

Images of modern architecture, relevant to concrete poetry given both the legacy of constructivism in Ulm and São Paulo and the 1950s-60s re-cladding of Glasgow in actual concrete, also become increasingly prevalent in later books, gradually replacing medieval cathedrals in line with that shift from older religious to modern secular cultural references. A hint of this interest is conveyed in early scrapbooks by advertisements and images from the 1938 Glasgow Empire Exhibition, its central feature the futuristic Tait Tower. The teenage Morgan was fascinated by this exhibition (Whyte, personal interview), pasting his ticket into *Scrapbook 3* (1936-53) beneath an advertiser's sketch of the tower looming grandly over a wooded hillside (436). In later volumes, images of monolithic functional buildings, constructivist or brutalist, multiply. One colour photograph from *Scrapbook 12* presciently surveys a sweep of futuristic city highway in São Paulo (2411); but the most engaging images are of the 1950s-60s renovation of Morgan's home city. The same book features a panoramic shot of a new high-rise council estate at Moss Heights, 1954 (2324), *Scrapbook 15* the "lights of the first multi-

storey housing block in the Hutchestown-Gorbals development scheme reflecting on the river Clyde"; that image is from 1962, the year Morgan moved to a similar estate in Anniesland (3042). One annotated photograph from the same book, of tower blocks under construction in Paisley in 1959, gives a sense of the dizzying speed with which the landscape around Glasgow was changing, announcing "15 storeys completed in 30 working days" (3051). These images suggest a strong topical resonance of the word "concrete" for an inhabitant of Glasgow at that time, and that outer space might not have seemed the only radically new human habitat demanding fresh aesthetic responses through poetry: Morgan's autobiographical "Epilogue: Seven Decades" (1990) tellingly connects "Saõ/ Paulo's poetic-concrete revolution" with "another concrete revolution" in the city of his birth (594).

Inter-textual references in later scrapbooks also suggest Morgan's burgeoning sense of a burgeoning context, pre-concrete, for visual poetry: the fifteenth contains cut-ups by William Burroughs and Sinclair Belies, the twelfth an untitled e.e. cummings poem from *95 poems* (1958), next to a similarly grammatically jumbled magazine misprint (qtd., 2341):

> off a pane) the
> (dropp
> ingspinson
> his
>
> back mad)fly(ly
> who
> all at)stops
> (once

Perhaps Morgan also took from cummings a sense of visual poetry's peculiar aptitude in evoking the expressions and movements of animals.

The scrapbooks also served as a workshop for formal experiment. McGonigal and Hepworth downplay stylistic links with concrete poetry, "unknown to Morgan in the post-war period when he continued to build the scrapbooks", connecting the underlying compositional principle to surrealism and renaissance emblem books (11). Nonetheless, some of these experiments clearly honed techniques later turned to concrete ends, not least Morgan's exploration of font and layout as aspects of linguistic meaning, evident, for example, in a double-spread in *Scrapbook 12* containing ticket

stubs, cards, advertisements and banknotes collected during a 1955 study tour of Russia (2521-22; fig. 1). Besides piquing Morgan's interest in Russian language, these materials surely appealed because of the new and diverse range of typefaces, and of sizes, colours and textures of graphemes, which they presented.

On other pages, phrases composed from collaged newspaper cuttings showcase the kind of manipulation of existing language explored in many of Morgan off-concrete subgenres. In particular, the Dada-esque friction generated by these largely pre-Burroughs "cut-ups" between the initial and extracted meaning of a quote, and their rough, bricolage-like composition, gives them the same air of anarchic counter-message as his *Newspoems*, composed from 1965 onwards, which arguably supplanted the scrapbook project, abandoned the following year. Like John Heartfield's photo-montages, many polemically flip the tone or context of a quote: one example from *Scrapbook 3* reads: "THE LEMMINGS ... the possibility of a preponderance of wind in such an organisation ... UNO PLANS GREAT ... International ... ROAD TO RUIN" (65). Beneath are strips of images – a mushroom cloud, a row of gravestones, rising smoke – annotated by an eye-witness account of the first atomic bomb tests in New Mexico, July 1945. The subsequent development of weapons of mass destruction – a source of "near-despair" to Morgan (McGonigal and Hepworth 3) – is tracked across several similar compositions.

There are also spatial juxtapositions of visual and linguistic data which create the kind of concise, visually oriented conceptual connection typical of concrete grammar. Indeed, notwithstanding Morgan's interest in Surrealist art, and its influence on Dylan Thomas or W.S. Graham, the random contrast of obscure symbols resolved by subliminal connection is a technique only occasionally, quite self-consciously adopted. More often, Morgan binds together image and text by explicit thematic link, those individual units of data normally large and intact enough, moreover, for their particular thematic import to be clear even when that link is more esoteric. Some such juxtapositions from early scrapbooks show Morgan musing on the possibility of universal expressive tendencies or motifs, a concern itself relevant to concrete's structuralist foundations. One portentous series of drawings from 1939 shows different historical uses of the swastika: on an Anglo-Saxon urn, a Mykenean vase from 1200 BC, repoussé bronze from the Necropolis of Koban … (*Scrapbook 1*, 300; fig. 1). Others are comic: one grotesque constellation from *Scrapbook 2* (1933-53) shows a two-headed


Fig. 1. From Morgan's scrapbooks, reproduced by kind permission of the Special Collections Department at Glasgow University Library and the Edwin Morgan Trust.

lamb from the *Daily Mail* (1938), a two-headed terrapin from *Zoo* magazine (1937), and a two-headed snake from *Bulletin* (1935). In later scrapbooks, the compositional formula shifts, sequences of articles and photographs dedicated to single subjects such as the space race. These attempts to spatially collate visual and linguistic data suggest an interest both in using graphic space as a structural agent of signification, and in forging precise, logical links between disparate pieces of information, which is arguably more concretist than surrealist. It is hardly surprising then, that Morgan's interest was piqued on May 25, 1962 by Melo e Castro's note.

Concrete Poetry

Morgan must have written to Melo e Castro promptly after reading that note, as by June 3, Melo e Castro had responded:

> Dear Sir
> Thank you very much for your letter and for the interest you take in POESIA CONCRETA. By the same post I am sending you a copy of a short Anthology just published in Lisbon through the Embaixada do Brasil, but of course it includes only brasilian poets. For further information you can write to Mr. AUGUSTO DE CAMPOS – R.Cândido Espinheira 635 – São Paulo – Brasil....

Apparently, Morgan only took up that offer after almost a year: a letter from Augusto dated March 21, 1963 seems to contain his response to an introductory missive: "I was thinking to ask Ian H. Finlay about your address when your letter arrived – a nice surprise". By August 1962, of course, Finlay had contacted the "Brazil poet" and was planning to publish his work. Morgan's relative nonchalance regarding personal acquaintance suggests both the slimmer artistic and emotional significance he placed on group membership, and a less whole-hearted adoption of the concrete idiom. A 1964 lecture transcript certainly implies the latter: "I speak as a practitioner, but not as one who has 'gone over' to concrete as some poets have done. To me it is a sideline which I find useful & rewarding for producing certain effects" ("Concrete Poetry").[4] "Some poets" perhaps indicates Finlay. In any case, "sideline" seems a slightly ungenerous term, as those "certain effects" facilitated many of Morgan's keenest aesthetic concerns. Besides allowing him to exercise the graphic sense displayed in his scrapbooks, concrete's embrace of modern communicational structures stoked an interest sparked

by engagement with Marshall McLuhan's philosophy of communication. By giving the impression of a similar embrace, and by adopting a style so evidently foreign in style and geographical origin as concrete, Morgan was also able to counteract the perceived pessimism regarding modernity, and the geographical and cultural inwardness, of contemporary Scottish and English poetry, thereby defining a forward-looking poetics which was pointedly Scottish.

Taking these points in turn, Morgan contended in his 1964 lecture that "the battle between linearity & spatiality which concrete reflects is something that is in life itself & is going to have far-ranging consequences", giving two "practical illustrations":

> I) when you enter a very modern newly designed shop or a large open-plan house ... you don't see the familiar signposts & you don't quite know where to go or what to do - this is because the concept of space has taken over and it needs some adjustment … II) recent agitation in universities for seminars as against lectures … the underlying & probably unsuspected reason is that the lecture is linear & the seminar is spatial & the younger generation senses this & wants the spatial!

As Bell notes in "Experimenting with the Verbivocovisual" (116-17), this sense of the resonances of spatiality is clearly influenced by McLuhan's discussion in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) of "simultaneity" as a binding principle of information transmission in the epoch of electronic communication. Confusingly for our purposes, McLuhan calls this the "aural" age, associating it with ancient and third-world preliterate societies, and contrasting it with the receding "visual" age of print: "[t]he visual makes for the explicit, the uniform, and the sequential in painting, in poetry, in logic, history. The non-literate modes are implicit, simultaneous and discontinuous, whether in the primitive past or the electronic present" (57). Morgan's sense of a "battle" leans on McLuhan's assertion that these two era and modes of thought were currently overlapping, in friction. McLuhan welcomed certain possibilities of the new aural culture, associating simultaneity with the capacity to hold information channeled through different senses in a relativising state of tension, preventing the "hypnosis" arising from "the dominance of one sense" (73); although aural culture itself is considered liable to induce hypnosis, the non-rational performativity of its methods of assertion reducing social groups to de-individuated "tribal" or "corporate" identity. Nonetheless, Morgan's examples reflect a sense of the cultural pertinence and cognitive value of concrete poetry's spatial grammar, clearly

shaped by McLuhan's postulation of a new culture of spatiality and aurality; as well as leaning on classical concrete's architectural parallels – particularly relevant in mid-renovation Glasgow – and, more eccentrically, upon a university tutor's particular cultural remit. Importantly though, despite this endorsement, recondite linear narrative was a fundamental off-concrete technique; attempts to exclusively embrace spatiality as a structuring device peter out early in Morgan's concrete phase.

For Morgan, this spatialism indicated a broader ease with modern, technologically altered urban experience: one aspect of the quality defined in his *Peace News* article "Concrete Poetry" (1965) as "post-existentialist" (7). Comments elsewhere suggest that this post-existentialism was reacting less against "the world of Kafka and Eliot and Camus and Sartre", as that article contends, than against the alienation from modern urban experience implied in certain canons of twentieth-century English and Scottish poetry (ibid.). In the first case, Morgan often disparaged the depiction of that experience in the Anglo-American modernist tradition typified by *The Waste Land*, recounting to Walker "a considerable element of repulsion in the view of life taken in the poem" ("Let's Go" 66): "[w]hat an extraordinary thing to say that London is an unreal city! This is the kind of thing that really riles me about Eliot!…Eliot looks at the crowds going over London Bridge and finds it unreal! Can you believe it? Can you believe that a man like that existed?" ("Let's Go" 68) Morgan probably saw the English Movement poets as inheritors of this Eliotic urban pessimism; certainly, his introduction to *Sovpoems* (1961), a collection of translations from communist authors, places Larkin amongst the progeny of Eliot's "dying charm" (4).

Eliot and Larkin's portrayals of urban depersonalisation in English cities were perhaps not creatively crippling for a writer wedded to his Scottish and Glaswegian identity, with socialist political leanings contrary to both authors'. They might rather have presented an opportunity to define an urban Scottish poetry in contrast to peevish English alternatives. But elsewhere, Morgan refers exasperatedly to the similar treatment which Scottish cities, particularly his own, had received in twentieth-century Scottish writing, often at the hands of nominally socialist authors. "Glasgow Writing" (1984), for example, criticises Hugh MacDiarmid's gruesome depictions of alienated urban consciousness in poems such as "Glasgow 1938":

> MacDiarmid expresses what he sees of the Glasgow of the 1930s through strong images of disgust. The place is dead, it is cold, it is stupid, it is vulgar, it is mindless, it is ugly, it is impotent. The main point he makes (apart from the emotion of disgust) is that Glasgow's people have sold their soul to business, to the abstractions of commerce and a go-getting philosophy….(4-5)

Behind the Marxist critique, "[p]art of this", Morgan notes, is simply "a suspicion and dislike of cities in themselves, if they are large, modern and industrial" (5). In "The Beatnik in the Kailyard" (1962), written immediately prior to his turn to concrete, and with Glasgow probably especially in mind, Morgan criticised the more general unwillingness of Scottish authors:

> [T]o move out into the world with which every child now at school is becoming familiar - the world of television and sputniks, automation and LPs, electronic music and multistorey flats, rebuilt city centres and new towns, coffee bars and bookable cinemas, air travel and transistor radios, colour photography and open-plan houses, paperbacks and water-skiing, early marriage and larger families.…

Such "material differences in society imply spiritual, moral and aesthetic differences", he adds (73). Morgan's embrace of these differences through concrete poetry defined a Scottish poetics of urbanity and technology in opposition to national and civic as well as English precedents, and to socialist poetry as well as what Morgan's *Sovpoems* introduction refers to as the poetry of the "bourgeois" world (4).

Simply embracing a medium so obviously alien to the UK in geographical and stylistic heritage, moreover, countered what Morgan saw as a coextensive inattentiveness to global literary cultures among such writers. Concrete was amongst various international poetry movements to which he paid homage from the late 1950s to this end, including the Russian redcats and the beats. Indeed, his affinity with the Noigandres was bolstered by the shared enthusiasm for twentieth-century Russian literature revealed in Augusto's introductory letter:

> Really, your collaboration in P.O.T.H attracted my attention. It was not only your 'wee' poem that Ian explained to me ["Meeloney's Reply to McBnuigrr"] … but also your translations from Mayakovsky and others....In the Brazilian group of Concrete Poetry ... there are some students of Russian language; among them my brother Haroldo de Campos and myself. Haroldo ... has made brilliant translations of Mayakovsky....Also Khlébnikov....We are very interested,

> too, in the young Russian poets Evtuchenko and Voznesensky and were delighted to see your nice translation of V. in P.O.T.H….

Morgan also began mailing the Noigandres Russian poetry, as there was, Augusto continued, "an increasing difficulty with the importation of Russian books", "under the pretext that they may include subversive matters". His comments suggest the volatility of Brazil's political situation even before the March 1964 military coup; Morgan's reference to sending "airmail solidarity to Saõ/ Paulo's poetic-concrete revolution" in "Epilogue: Seven Decades" probably recalls these clandestine deliveries, and implies a sense of solidarity with artists suffering under right-wing autocracies like that established after the coup (594). Whatever its other motives, however, such international-mindedness was also intended to set Morgan's poetics apart from the inwardness of recent English poetic milieus, particularly the Movement, from whom he recalled "not getting anything" in a 1994 interview with Michael Gardiner (54): partly because of the apathy to international literature described in his *Peace News* article.[5] Morgan added that his 1950s and early-1960s poetic interests represented an attempt to define "a thing that spread out across countries—Scotland America and Russia for example", rather than "relating Scotland to what was happening in England" (54). His *Sovpoems* introduction criticises a general Western disengagement from world literature – specifically communist – rooted in a lopsided preoccupation with Anglo-American modernism.

But like Finlay, Morgan also saw the adoption of a foreign poetic idiom as a blow against the stifling isolationism of Scottish literary culture itself, still dominated by the Scottish Renaissance. "The Beatnik in the Kailyard" sums up Morgan's sense of the negative effects of the Renaissance – which Morgan did not dogmatically oppose – referring to a "new provincialism….Almost no interest has been taken by established writers in Scotland in the important postwar literary developments in America and on the Continent. Ignorance is not apologized for" (72). The alertness to international literary avant-gardes which his concrete poetry represented was thus a means of both resisting the tendency to relate Scotland to England, and of redefining Scottish poetry itself, by moving it out into the light of the modern world.

Animal and Computer Poems

Morgan's earliest concrete poems were seemingly composed between May 1962 and July 1963: "Chinese Cat", "Scotch Cat", "Like, Little Russian Cat", "Siesta of a Hungarian Snake", "Bees' Nest", "Summer Haiku", "The Wreck of the Deutschland", "Original Sin at the Water-Hole", "Unscrambling the Waves at Goonhilly" and "Dogs Round a Tree".[6] In June 1963, "Dogs Round a Tree" and "Original Sin at the Water-Hole" were published in *Fish-Sheet*; by July, "Summer Haiku", "Siesta of a Hungarian Snake", "Chinese Cat" and "Unscrambling the Waves at Goonhilly" had seemingly appeared in *Invenção* 3. These first published concrete poems were followed by journal contributions throughout 1964: to the German periodical *Die Sonde*, Henri Chopin's Paris-based *OU*, *Labris* and, in the UK, *Cleft*, *Link*, the *TLS* and *POTH* (Whyte "Edwin Morgan: A Checklist" 200-02).

The above list contains a large number of playful picture poems, attuned to the expressions of animals; in December 1963, Morgan composed "The Computer's First Christmas Card", inaugurating a comparable series of "computer poems". Notwithstanding his enthusiastic embrace of concrete style, these early forays seem characterised by a certain scepticism regarding classical principles. The former's pictorial visual effects, and comically small-scale themes, partly seem designed to subvert the idea that non-figurative graphics might underpin a universal semantics; the latter, besides similarly "contextualising" concrete grammar by ascribing it to a specific entity, parodies the notion of objective expression by scrutinising the capacities of a machine taken as its enabling metaphor. These characteristics are assessed in turn below – in the second case, partly via analysis of a "non-computer poem" which exemplifies the ethical grounds of Morgan's scepticism – although in both cases, discussion is concluded by revealing ways in which they explore classical stylistics more faithfully.

Both types of poem abound in Morgan's first concrete collection *Starryveldt*, published by Gomringer's eponymous press in January 1965, after Gomringer had written proposing the idea on April 24, 1964, two weeks after they began corresponding: "i estimate your poems very very much. i wanted to have written them myself".[7] This publication route is somewhat ironic, given Morgan's initial connection to the movement via Brazil, and occasionally mildly unfavourable contrasts of Germanic concrete with the Brazilian variant, with its facility for social commentary and wit:

> [T]here was that kind of political involvement right from the start with [the Noigandres]….I compare them in my mind with some of the other concrete poets whom I also came across, people like Gomringer….I admired them too, but … I wasn't so strongly drawn to them as something that was on my wavelength. I liked the way the in which the Brazilians were able to be witty, more playful than the German poets… (Interview by Michael Gardiner 56-57)

"Into the Constellation" hones the terms of this relative scepticism, querying the capacity of the "German poets' " work to assume social efficacy by defining a universal sign system, asserting language's slimmer ability to assume universal values than "sculpture and painting" (24), and criticising the "anti-involvement aesthetics" – specifically attributed to Albers – potentially resulting (22). Perhaps *Starryveldt's* activist interventions and irreverent wit partly reflect desire to air such doubts in a relevant forum.

The animal poems dominating the first half of the collection – which is roughly chronologically organised – transgress classical principles in their Apollinaire-esque pictoriality, and by their specificity, even insignificance, of theme.[8] Augusto noted the first quality in his introductory letter, by contrast with some of Morgan's visually non-figurative poems:

> [O]ur manifesto ... make[s] a distinction between the phases of development of concrete poetry….A poem like Dogs round a tree would belong to the first phase ["organic form and phenomenology of composition"]; Chinese cat and Unscrambling the waves at Goonhilly, to the second ["geometric form and mathematics of composition (sensible rationalism)"]. Please, understand me, this is not to lessen the poems of the first phase; we believe physiognomy, that may reach to a high abstracted form, a valuable form of expression; we mean rather a clarification of the process, for the first phase links concrete poetry to a whole tradition: that of Mallarmé's 'A Throw of the Dice'.

"Dogs Round a Tree" exemplifies both the principles outlined prior to Augusto's quote. Although authentically "concrete" in its constricted, two-word semantic lexicon – reminiscent of "ping pong" – and absence of linear grammar, the poem subtly substitutes linguistic reference with visual mimicry: exclamation-mark lines denote trees, the expanding and contracting forms of a canine yelp the dogs' erratic path around them; the comic insignificance of the resulting image seems deliberate. Morgan's descriptive phrase is also so specific – as compared to the more abstracted conceptual

associations of "ping pong" – and so stereotypical – stylised to the point of complete alienation from its referent: no dog really "bowwows" – as to appear almost consciously, ironically narrow in effect, whimsically citing children's books or comic strips while subverting the idea of a universally resonant binary systems of signs.

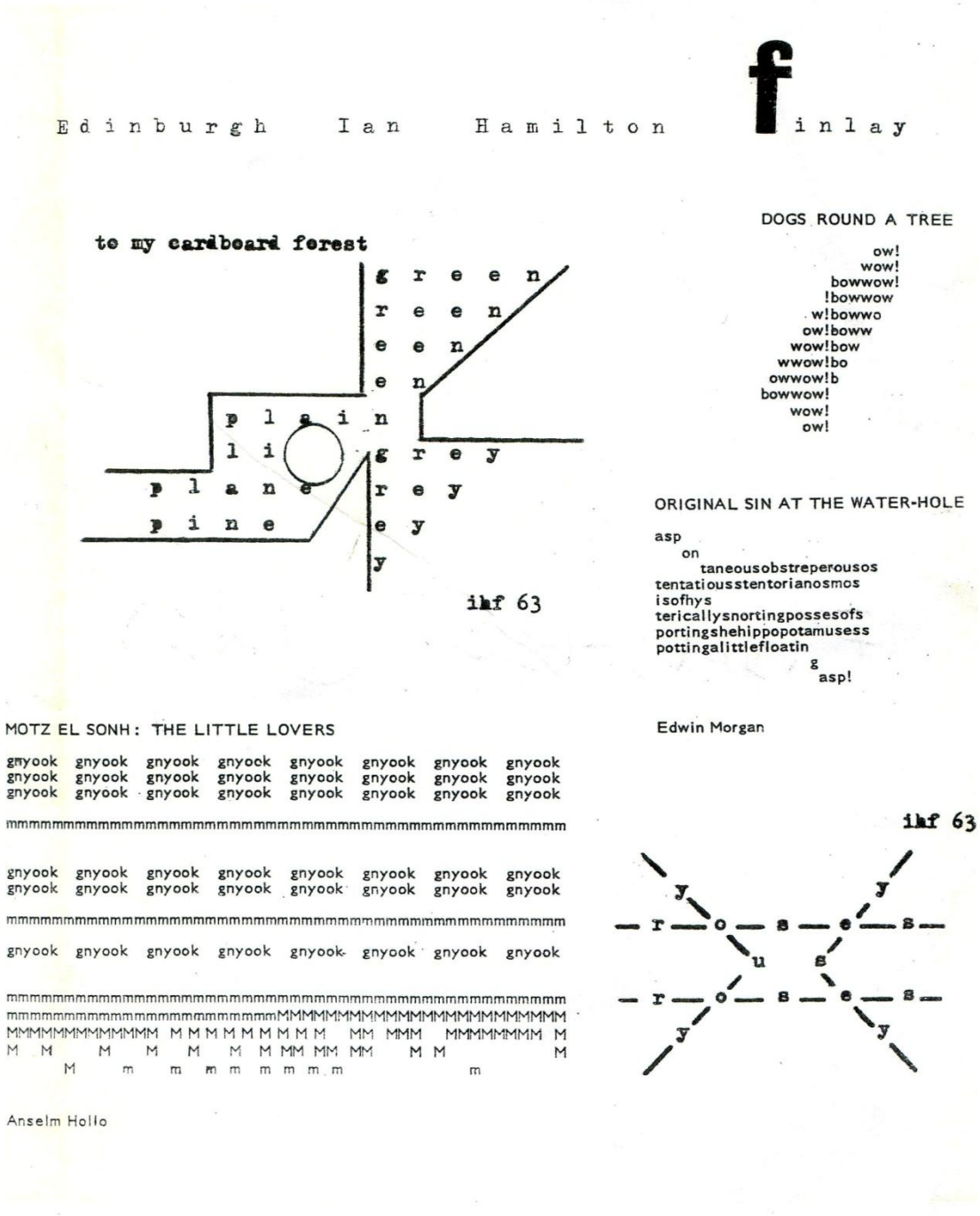



Fig. 2. "Dogs Round a Tree" and "Original Sin at the Water-Hole". *Fish-Sheet.*

"Siesta of a Hungarian Snake", published in *The Second Life* (1968), again uses two correlating language-forms to create a sense of elementary cognitive relationships, enhanced in this case by graphic symmetry, both between letter-pairs – taking *s* as *z*

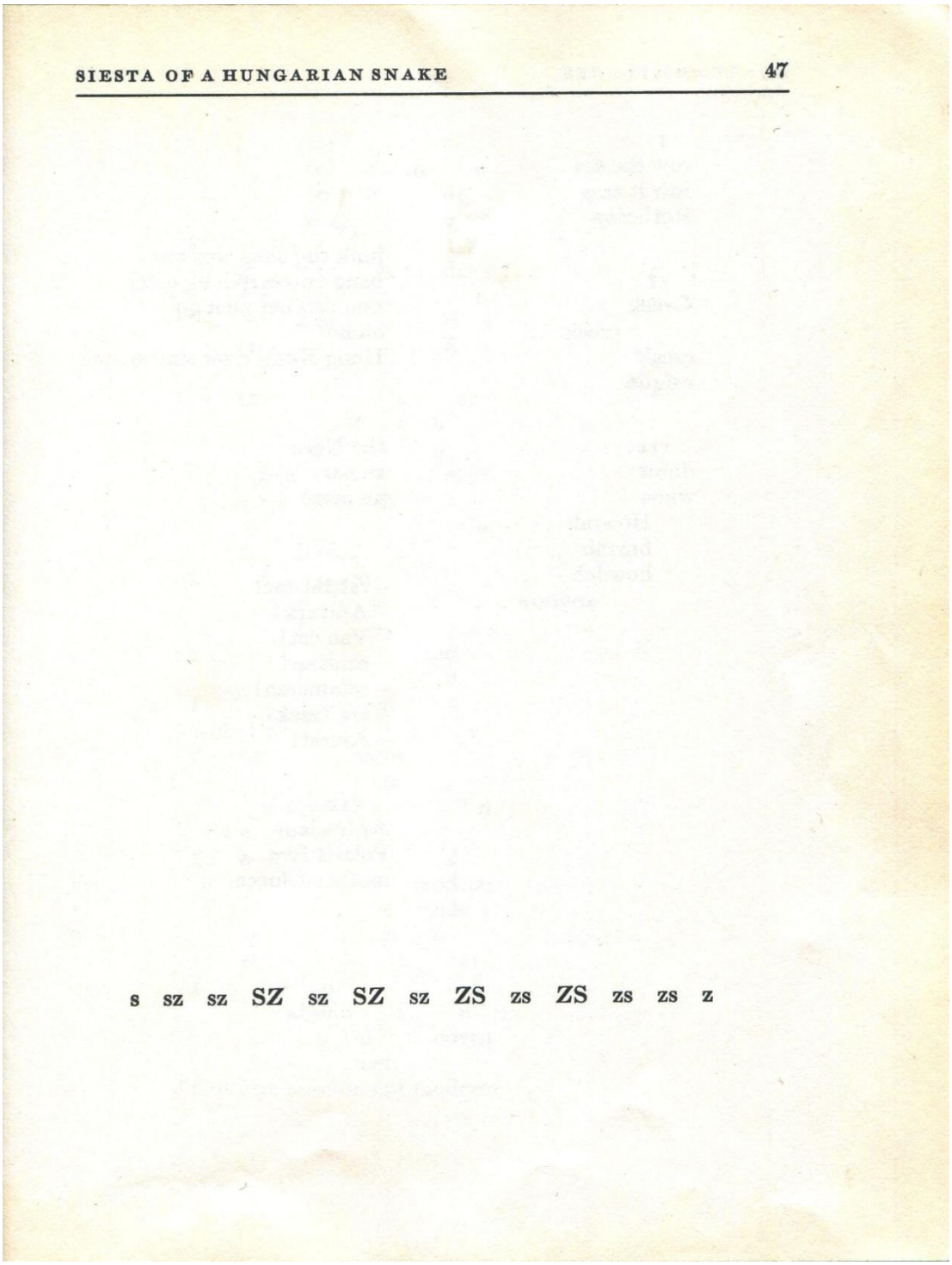
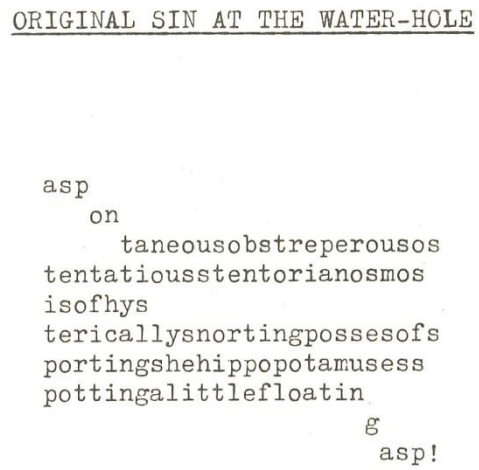



Fig. 3. "Siesta of a Hungarian Snake". *The Second Life*.

mirrored – and across the line as a whole, through a central switch of letter-positions. But the graphic is also clearly "organic", indeed, surprisingly multifaceted in pictorial effect. The whole poem depicts a sleeping snake, the diagonal curves and slashes its patterned markings; capital letters are the bulges of half-digested prey making the siesta necessary. The shift between capitals and lower cases also marks the crescendo and diminuendo of a snore, making the snake "his own snore", as Morgan noted in his 1964 lecture ("Concrete Poetry"). The phrase itself, besides invoking Hungarian morphology, is also based "on conventional representation in strip-cartoons of how a sleeping person snores" (ibid.). Again, by interweaving pictorial effect and semantic device, both specifying and stereotypical, the poem evokes comic strips or children's stories while light-heartedly undermining the ambitions of its classical forebears.

However, such poems also serve a less self-reflexive, more serious purpose, presaging Morgan's more effective adoption of classical principles in future pieces. Something of that purpose can be ascertained from another *Starryveldt* poem, "Original Sin at the Water-Hole". A snakelike coil of sibilant adjectives, this portrait of a snake, unlike the other animals', entails a narrative, describing thrashing "shehippopotamuses" disturbed by "alittlefloatin/g/asp!" This reincorporation of linear statement partly subverts classical principles further; but combined with pictorial device it also forges space for another message: the first and last lines are identical, so that the poem mimics an ancient emblem for infinity – the ouroboros, a serpent consuming its own tail – while also suggesting that the phrase, by looping back into itself, could be repeated indefinitely. These implications of endless repetition, enhanced by the absence of implied temporal progression in the narrative line – a single subject-descriptive phrase, unmoored from a time-bound sentence – create a freeze-frame of the bestial subject matter, of the endless, amoral material process writhing and snorting on beneath language's moral veneer: the "original sin" which the snake also stands for. The poem, and this poetic bestiary generally, thus fulfill, or at least acknowledge, the desire for a grammar stripped of religiously mediated subjectivity invoked in those early verses, by depicting the pre-human, godless perceptual realm of the animal kingdom: an example of Morgan's use of concrete form to metaphorically access worlds beyond the remit of conventional human experience.


ORIGINAL SIN AT THE WATER-HOLE

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tentatiousstentorianosmos
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asp!

Fig. 4. "Original Sin at the Water-Hole". *Starryveldt*.

Another such world was the mindscape of the computer, a theme with which Morgan was engaged prior to, and throughout, his concrete phase. Besides *The Whittrick's* Faustian ruminations, in summer 1964 Morgan and Jack Rillie recorded radio talks entitled "The Computer and the Critic" and "The Computer and the Creator", as he noted in a letter to Houédard (July 14/15, 1964). Morgan was also aware of Nanni Balestrini and Max Bense's early-1960s experiments with computer-shuffled poetry, the latter the subject of the Willett article to which Melo e Castro's note responded. In 1965, Morgan translated Balestrini's "Tape Mark 1" (1961) – composed of quotes from Michihito Hachiya's *Hiroshima Diary*, Paul Goldwin's *The Mystery of the Elevator* and Lao Tzu's *Tao te Ching*, shuffled on the Lombard Provinces Savings Bank computer in Milan, with "head-codes" and "end-codes" narrowing the range of possible combinations – for John Sharkey's magazine *Lisn*.[9] Again, the interest seems to have been in exemplifying

the non-metaphysical basis of human expression, by showing the capacity of a self-evidently soulless object to perform comparable expressive tasks. Morgan would certainly have been interested, then, in classical concretists' engagement with computerised expression as a talismanic metaphor for objectivity, exemplified in the "Pilot Plan's" comparisons between poetic composition and cybernetic feedback: "the poem as a mechanism regulating itself" (72).

However, Morgan's computer sequence seems partly concerned with querying the principle of objectivity implicit in such comparisons. "The Computer's First Christmas Card", published in the "Changing Guard" *TLS* before reappearing in *Starryveldt*, presents its protagonist as babyishly nonsensical in its very drive for total aptitude, only developing the capacity for sensible expression by discarding that compulsion and instead adopting the obliquity of individuated human thought. This not only suggested the infancy of computer technology, but seemingly dispensed with the notion of objectivity which the computer emblematised: any meaningful act of communication, the poem seems to imply, presupposes specificity, and thus partiality, of content, form and purpose.

As Morgan noted in *Cybernetic Serendipity*, the poem opens with the computer "scanning a semantic as well as formal 'store' (all the words relating somehow to the context of Christmas cheer)" to locate the perfect Christmas greeting, its word-choices restricted by a grammatical rule: "two words each having consonant-vowel-double-consonant-y" ("Note on Simulated Computer Poems"). The ticker-tape shape approximates early computer print-outs; tabulated, typewritten graphemes remove human tone from the appearance and implied recital; Morgan published all his computer poems, wherever possible, in typewriter font. However, this implied extraction of subjectivity leads not to trans-subjective accuracy but to infantile babble, as the computer, lacking any motive for picking a particular phrase, trawls arbitrarily though arrangements from its word-pool. Eventually, it does make a choice:

```
merrymerry
merrymerry
merryChris
ammerryasa
Chrismerry
asMERRYCHR
YSANTHEMUM
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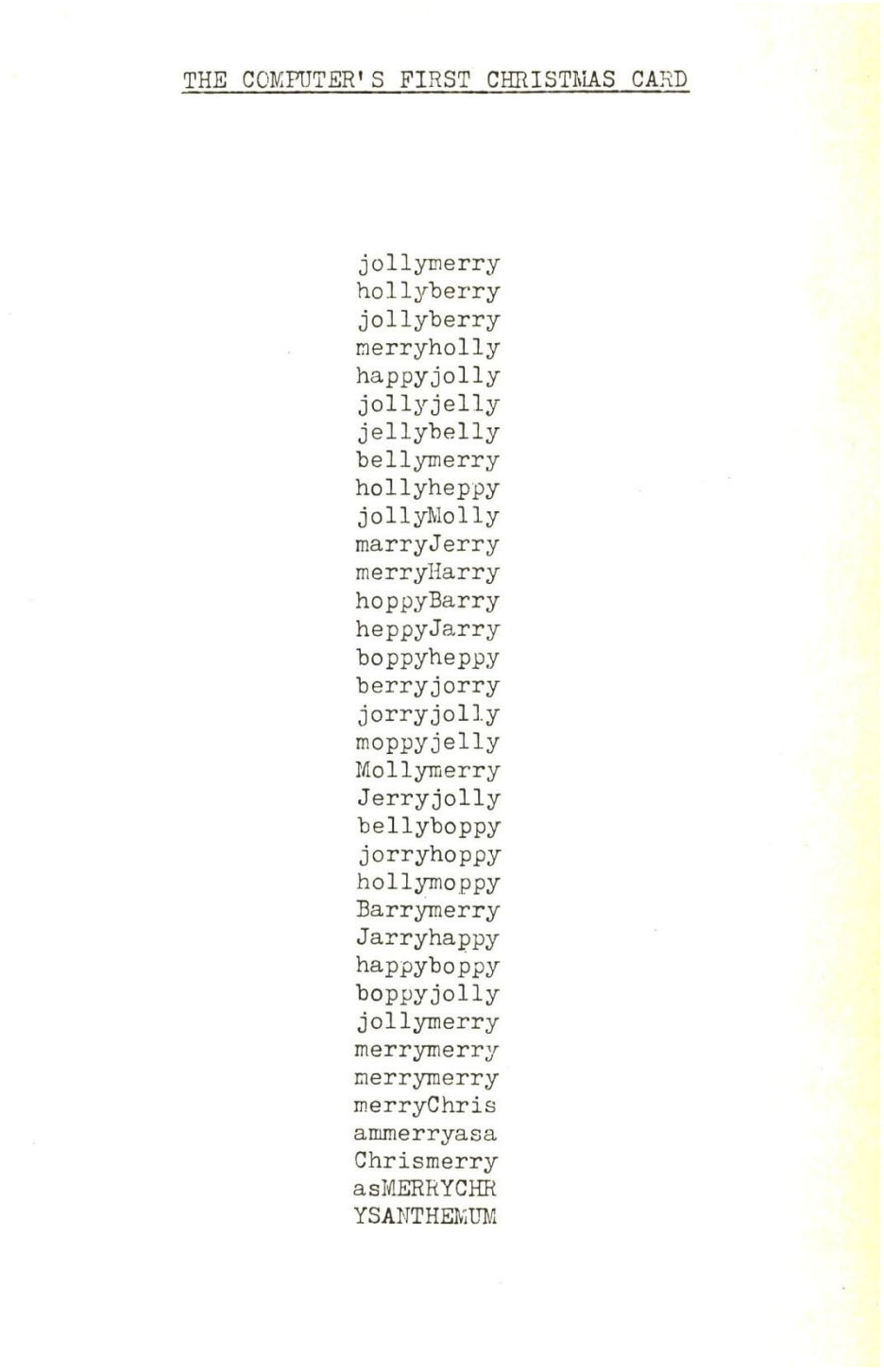


THE COMPUTER'S FIRST CHRISTMAS CARD

jollymerry
hollyberry
jollyberry
merryholly
happyjolly
jollyjelly
jellybelly
bellymerry
hollyheppy
jollyMolly
marryJerry
merryHarry
hoppyBarry
heppyJarry
boppyheppy
berryjorry
jorryjolly
moppyjelly
Mollymerry
Jerryjolly
bellyboppy
jorryhoppy
hollymoppy
Barrymerry
Jarryhappy
happyboppy
boppyjolly
jollymerry
merrymerry
merrymerry
merryChris
ammerryasa
Chrismerry
asMERRYCHR
YSANTHEMUM

Fig. 5. "The Computer's First Christmas Card". *Starryveldt*.

"Chrysanthemum", as Morgan's *Cybernetic Serendipity* note continues, is not simply the computer's misprocessing of "Christmas", which would function as a balder critique, but a reference to an "emblematic good-luck flower … one might buy or give at Christmas-time". The computer in fact finds a meaningful phrase – albeit half-

accidentally – but only by dispensing with the goal of total accuracy represented by its grammatical formula, and turning to metaphor: to the kind of partial, idiomatic language indicative of individual perspective or temperament. It thus achieves meaningful expression not by eradicating but by imitating subjective thought: the underlying sentiment runs largely counter to the objectifying thrust of classical poetics.

The same sentiment is suggested in a letter of Morgan's to Hansjörg Mayer (June 25, 1967) regarding the preparation of *The Second Life* (1968), the first book in Scotland typeset on computer, according to McGonigal (196). The malfunctioning new technology had delayed release, and Morgan's reaction to these "teething problems" was indulgently anthropomorphising: "[t]he computer has been doing some very strange things with the text! – it is temperamental, and sometimes will indignantly reject a line, or print a few lines in capital letters just to show its liberty of judgement…." The computer expresses itself, Morgan suggests, not by achieving its task but by diverging from it, thereby revealing "liberty of judgement". "The Computer's Second Christmas Card", published in *Gnomes* (1968) – after its "First Birthday Card" appeared in Bann's 1966 *Beloit* anthology – expands on this idea, depicting a machine whose greater expressive prowess connotes wilder divergence from task reflecting greater individuality of character: perhaps a transition from infancy to young adulthood. Practically speaking, these larger divergences reflect the greater complexity of the task being attempted, to generate "a narrative and not a mere phrase": the story of King Wenceslas (Morgan "Note on Simulated Computer Poems"). Because it is attempting prose, the computer uses the "five-letter pattern used for coded messages" in World War Two (ibid.):

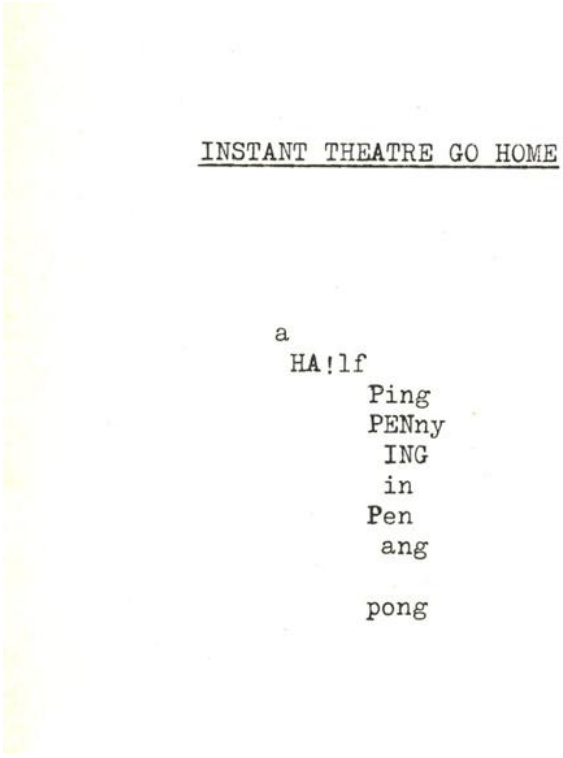
> goodk kkkkk unjam ingwe nches lass? start again goodk
> lassw enche sking start again kings tart! again sorry….

These ostentatious processing errors partly function as knockabout comedy at the computer's expense. But they also reveal the computer's greater capacity for subjective leaps of association than its predecessor. This initial jump, prompted by the likeness of "good king Wenceslas" and "good class wenches" – a sexual awakening? – precedes a similar morphological muddle around "Stephen":

> tonth effff fffff unjam feast ofsai ntste venst efanc
> utsai ntrew ritef easto fstep toeso rryan dsons orry!….

The underlined sections represent its servo-mechanism, which seems to indicate the new, perhaps adolescent level of self-scrutiny connoted by this new imaginative ability. This computer also eventually manages a remedial message – "subst itute track merry chris tmasa ndgoo dnewy/ earin 1699? check digit banks orryi n1966"– but reveals its expressive prowess not in reaching that target but in the idiosyncratic thematic links made during the approach.[10] Again, Morgan connects meaningful communication to subjectivity, critiquing the idea that objectivity was a logically coherent goal for poetry. "In poetry, you get the oyster as well as the pearl", as he put it: "the pursuit of purity is self-defeating" ("Statement by Edwin Morgan" 71).

This critique was ethically as well as logically compelled, as another *Starryveldt* poem implies by suggesting the moral pitfalls of a language stripped of specificity of reference. "Instant Theatre Go Home", composed January-February 1964, first published that year in *POTH*, mimics the phonetic range and shape of its publisher's "Ping Pong", but works outwards from Gomringer's sound-source, replacing that poem's abstract sign-system with evocations of a specific political event: oddly enough, the secession of Malaysia from British colonial rule.



INSTANT THEATRE GO HOME

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HA!lf
Ping
PENny
ING
in
Pen
ang

pong

Fig. 6. "Instant Theatre Go Home". *Starryveldt*.

Echoes of "Ping" ricochet down a central column stratified by repeated letter positions, including "Penang", the name of a North-West Malaysian Province and former capital of the British Straits Settlement, which had retained colony status until the Federation of Malaya gained independence in 1957; in 1963, Penang joined the new state of Malaysia, seen by many in the region as a neo-colonial puppet-state. Other permutations produce "half-pennying", an odd term suggesting half-measures or short changing; the underlying phrase, "A Half-Pennying in Penang", laconically critiques the reluctant British withdrawal from the region, made bloody by the Malayan Emergency of 1948-60, a war of independence waged by the guerrilla forces of the Malaysian National Liberation Army under Chin Peng, whose name is perhaps another invoked echo. Against this backdrop, the embedded phrases "ping pong", whose second syllable occupies the final line, and "happening" – picked out in capitals – become emblems of the inadvertent inhumaneness of Western art movements which, in their drive for utopian modes of expression, forget language's entanglement with the complexity and violence of the world itself, and its duty to attend to them. The title phrase "instant theatre", probably another reference to spontaneous performance, becomes similarly loaded with grim relevance to guerrilla skirmishes in the Malaysian jungle, which transform patches of undergrowth into "instant theatres" of war.

Accepting both the logical and ethical poles of this critique, Morgan's computer poems do not simply codify a scepticism of classical poetics. Despite their gently teasing attitude towards the notion of evading subjectivity, the computers' adaptation to idiom and metaphor also signifies subjectivity's redemptive incorporation into concrete's mechanical grammar. These qualities do not dissolve that grammar, moreover, but inhabit it, and are themselves enhanced by that inhabitation, as poems discussed below reveal. These early pieces thus enact that broader process by which Morgan brought the inhuman or mechanistic aspect of classical concrete syntax into fruitful contact with non-concrete effects of context and perspective, transforming both in the process.

## Typewriter, Three-Dimensional and Poster-Poems

That Morgan was not simply mocking classical principles through these works is confirmed by his development throughout the 1960s of other aspects of his practice which explored the concrete poem's non-figurative visual possibilities, revealing a more

faithful response to its underlying poetics. Morgan is not generally associated with this avenue of concrete aesthetics, his "solidarity with words" generally revealed by literary rather than graphic transformations of the style ("Statement by Edwin Morgan" 69). But even his production of poems on the typewriter activated a non-figurative visual impulse, spreading graphemes across an implied grid of regular character spaces. Many of the poems in *Starryveldt*, all set in typewriter font, articulate this latent grid through tabular or rectangular visual form, Gomringer's photo-lithographic reproduction of Morgan's typescripts thus an integral compositional process. That this emphasis on the grid was deliberate is suggested by Morgan's attempts to retain the typewritten appearance of poems across publications: a letter to Nicholas Zurbrugg of December 27, 1967 criticises the printing of "The Computer's First Birthday Card" in florid, greetings-card italics in Williams's anthology, on the basis that "I see these as typewriter poems where I am thinking in terms of typewriter space, equal width of letters…."[11]

Similar graphic sensibilities are revealed by the grander projects which Morgan hatched throughout the decade for three-dimensional and poster-poems, considered in turn below: although these were relatively few, and mainly unrealised collaborative works. On July 13, 1964 Morgan wrote to Mike Weaver, then soliciting sculpture proposals for the autumn 1964 Cambridge exhibition, suggesting a version of "French Persian Cats Having a Ball" set on horizontal platforms suspended in water: "I can envisage ... looking into a box or tank where the four parts of the piece are suspending or moving, at different depths, in relation to one another, in a kind of dance". He also suggested motorised, moving versions of "Dogs Round a Tree" and another *Starryveldt* poem, "Orgy", noting that the latter's "narrative order" "could be broken by movement, and indeed the severe alphabetic restriction which gives all the lines a certain common character begins to demand such a displacement, 'play', rearrangement, or (again) dance. The idea of a dance of components interests me particularly". This envisaged engagement with spatially dispersed elements, potentially moving or "dancing", represents a strikingly ambitious attempt to visually extend concrete technique without falling back on pictorial gesture, and to override narrative sequence through spatial arrangement. The plan fell through due to lack of funds and, interestingly, because Weaver felt that Morgan's visual ideas remained too illustrative of linguistic ones, writing "won't all 'projects' carved out in the mind result in constructions rather than compositions[?]" (September 14, 1964).[12] At the same time, Morgan was discussing the

possibility of a concrete film with John Sharkey, using stills of poems by Finlay, Furnival, Houédard, Morgan and Sharkey, with a soundtrack made from the poets' statements on their work collaged in "musique concrète pattern", as Sharkey explained to Morgan (September 8, 1964); money problems also put paid to this idea.

Only three years later was an ambitious off-the-page poem project realised, admittedly more "environmental" than three-dimensional. Morgan's *Festive Permutational Poem*, created for Bann's 1967 Brighton exhibition, comprised 54 words, half concerning Brighton's "egghead" associations, half its "pop" associations, as Morgan explained, divided into 18 modish, surreal three-word phrases ("Festive Permutational Poem"; see fig. 7). These phrases were printed on luminous streamers and displayed in shops and bus windows throughout the festival (ibid.). Through integration with the cityscape – a kind of non-figurative visual enhancement – and by soliciting chance encounter rather than linear reading, this poem assumed the kind of ambient environmental presence taken in early concrete manifestos as the means of renewing poetry's "organic function in society" (Gomringer "From Line to Constellation").

Morgan's concrete poster-poems extended the form in a similarly visually oriented manner. Some of the most striking were published in *Proverb Folder* (1969), a portfolio of half-square-metre cards featuring visual interpretations of Morgan's poems by John Furnival's Bath Academy students. Published by Openings, this project explored the boundaries between typographical layout and poetic collaboration, so the extent of Morgan's creative involvement is difficult to gauge, as he noted to Zurbrugg (December 27, 1967): "[o]ne has to accept (or, of course, reject) a mingled responsibility in such cases. I can accept it, though I can see that there are limits".[13] Nonetheless, *Proverb Folder* remains a noteworthy example of the form.

Morgan's poems rework proverbs such as "Every Cloud Has a Silver Lining" and "A Rolling Stone Gathers No Moss". The first, interpreted by Deborah Fulford, sets the names of different clouds – cirrus, cirrostratus, nimbus, cumulus, cumulonimbus – repeated within spaces defined by the relevant shape, at heights reflecting that cloud's position in the sky, using offset silver overlays as "linings" for white letters set against a blue background. The second draws much value from Morgan's comic poem, which gradually gathers the second part of the phrase around the first (see page 173):

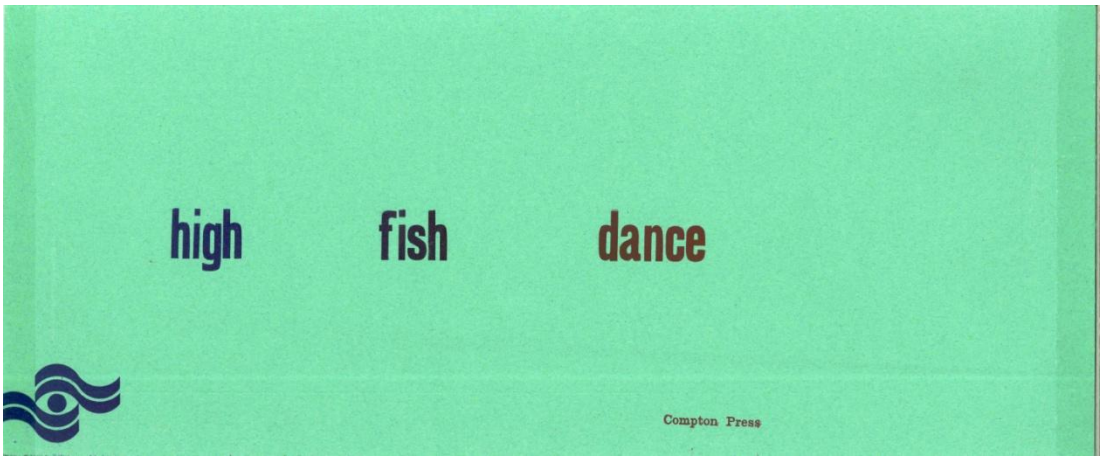





Fig. 7. From *Festive Permutational Poem*.

a rolling stone
a ronlling stone
a ronloling stone
a ronloling stomne
a ronloling stomone
a ronloling stomones
a ronloling stomoness

Simon Farrell's visual rendering uses two convex planes of widening lines, the left silver, the right green, diffusing into the white background at their edges, to suggest highlighted sections of a series of revolutions. These effects are pictorial, of course, but they also rely on elementary contrasts of colour, texture and shape which extend the poem's sensory value by the same pre-symbolic means attributable to Finlay's wall-poems. In many cases, these effects connote an invitation to non-linear engagement which overrides Morgan's general tendency towards narrative within the concrete poem. As such, these poster-poems, like Morgan's three-dimensional poem projects, represent a more eager engagement with the visual and spatial principles of classical poetics than might be associated with his work, counterbalancing the scepticism revealed in other poems of the period.

Permutational-esque, Emergent, One Word and Animal Poems

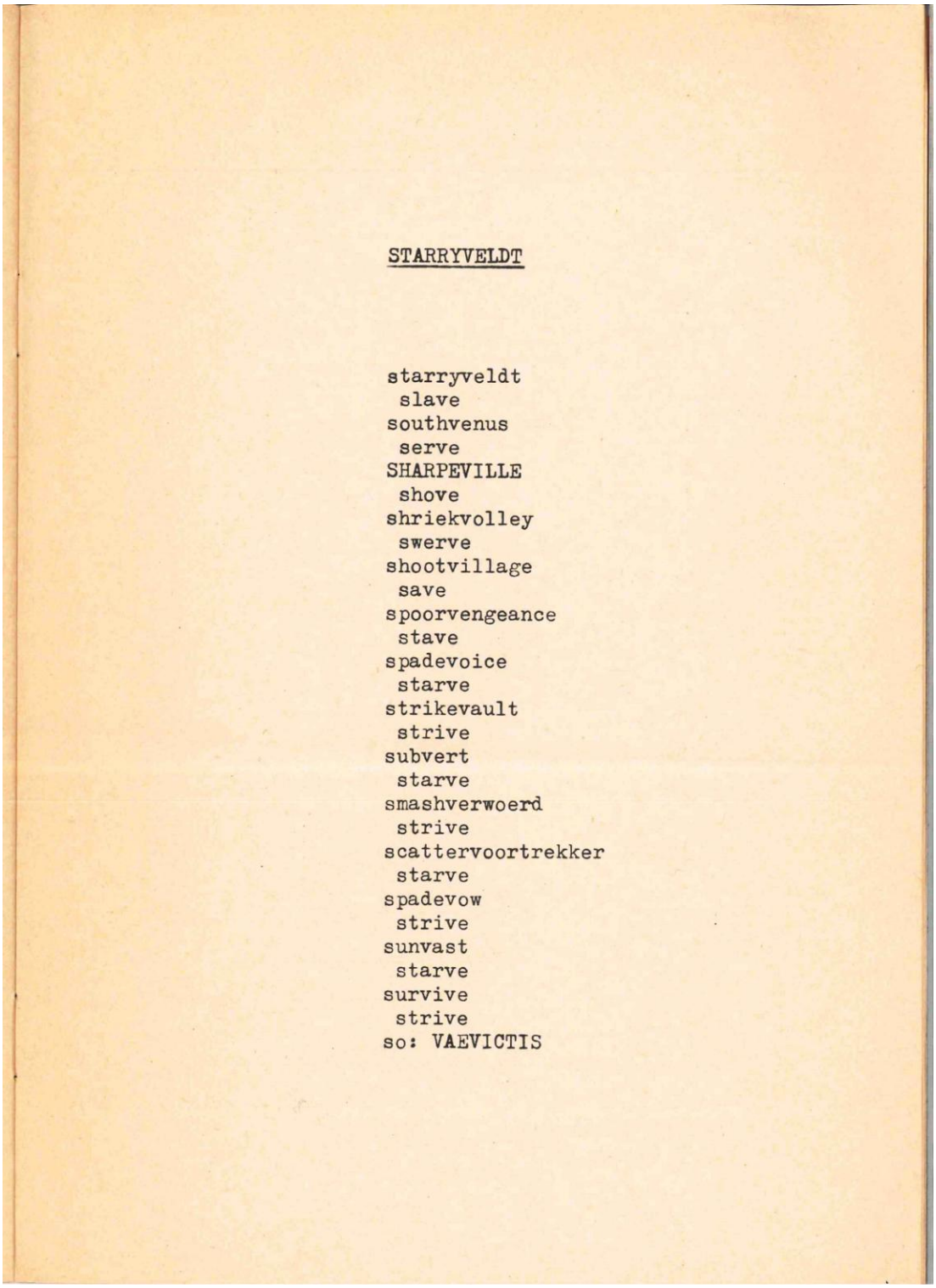
These two poles of Morgan's concrete practice appear resolved in the more symbiotic integration of classical and non-concrete device in various works of the mid-to-late 1960s. The types of poems discussed below, many of them named by Morgan – permutational-esque poems, "emergent poems", "one word poems" and the non-pictorial animal poems of *The Horsemans's Word* (1970) – combine the pronoun-less grammar, reductive lexicon and non-figurative graphics of classical concrete with a lexical freedom facilitating theme, narrative sequence and authorial perspective. Classical concrete's inhuman or mechanical overtones are tempered by these effects – those indicated in my introduction by the term "context" – which are in turn enhanced, made to seem convincingly "disinterested", by those implications of non-subjective composition, thus turning concrete poetry to contextual purpose.

The permutational-esque poem is distinct from the permutational in that the latter involves rearrangement of a single group of words or language-forms, whereas the

former merely gives the impression of such restricted composition, through close phonetic and graphic linkages, while covertly moving across a wide lexical field. Permutational-esque form was an ideal vehicle for topical and polemical concrete poetry, as that lexical range facilitated authorially invested narratives on specific themes, yet the impression of random shuffling repelled the inference of authorship, creating an air of mechanical impartiality. The form's capacity for deadpan humour, achieved by generating radical shifts in meaning through minute phonetic or graphic alteration, was often exploited to complementary ends.

This topical or polemical value is presaged by various early-1960s permutational poems, some of which reveal the need for that form's compositional strictures to be loosened to consolidate such values. An untitled poem from the first "Changing Guard" *TLS* ("SIMPLE MYTH LITERATURE PEN SET") is typical, shuffling the paper's title to create various surreal anagrams: "TRIPY TEAMSTERS UNPILE HELMET", "SALTPETRE TEETHES IN RIMY LUMP". The most tendentious, "THIS ELEMENTARY PURIST TEMPLE", pointedly becomes the header of the opposing page (see page 111), but in general the form's restriction of word choice, and thus of narrative and thematic possibility, prevented specificity of statement.

The title-poem from *Starryveldt* thus reflects a necessary stylistic adjustment, incorporating theme, narrative and thus authorial value by bursting the banks of the permutational word-pool; although some permutational poems, notably "Opening the Cage", achieve similar results. "Starryveldt's" strict grammatical rules – alternating monosyllabic and polysyllabic lines, mainly one-word, employing an *s*…*v*… construction principle – suggest selection from such a pool. But Morgan covertly spans a wide range of terms to evoke another specific political event: the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre, during which South African police opened fire on anti-apartheid protestors. Across the opening ten lines, the capitalised word "SHARPEVILLE" – source of the *s*…*v*… principle – seems to set the scene and sound. Around it, phonetically and thematically associated words ripple outwards, including "southvenus", a pun, Nicholson notes, on "parvenus", the European newcomers whom the black population must "serve" (91). Across these spatial radiations a narrative also unfolds, the word "SHARPEVILLE" seeming to herald the onset of the massacre, interrupting the grinding routine implied by "slave" and "serve" with sudden "shoves" and "swerves". Later, the refrain "starve



STARRYVELDT

starryveldt
slave
southvenus
serve
SHARPEVILLE
shove
shriekvolley
swerve
shootvillage
save
spoorvengeance
stave
spadevoice
starve
strikevault
strive
subvert
starve
smashverwoerd
strive
scattervoortrekker
starve
spadevow
strive
sunvast
starve
survive
strive
so: VAEVICTIS

Fig. 8. “Starryveldt”. *Starryveldt.*

… strive" seems to widen the time-frame, as if predicting a long, bitter struggle for enfranchisement:

```
subvert
 starve
smashverwoerd
 strive
scattervoortrekker
 starve
spadevow
 strive....
```

Unrestricted word choice allows specific targets to be identified, including Prime Minister Verwoerd, and the economically powerful Dutch Voortrekker population: to be "smashed" and "scattered" respectively. The final line incorporates a conjunction to tee up an acerbic yet ambivalent narrative conclusion: "so: VAEVICTIS" ("woe to the vanquished"). Theme and narrative, enabled by freedom of word choice, subsume concrete abstraction in anti-colonial polemic; but importantly, the poem does not thereby dispense with classical principles. The curiously fatalistic narrative tone crystallised in that closing epithet – the disenfranchised have no rights, Morgan suggests – is partly an effect of the reductive syntax and insistent phonetic rhythms appropriated from the poem's classical forebears. That tone, moreover, stems the sentimental or self-aggrandising overflow of pity which the topic might have invited, suspending classical and non-concrete gesture to exemplary off-concrete effect.[14]

A similar tension between compositional elements is generated in Morgan's *Emergent Poems*, his most striking contribution to concrete style. Published in summer 1967, this sequence grew from a poem composed, McGonigal notes, during Morgan's bus-ride home from visiting his terminally ill father in summer 1965 (157). It is formed from the phrase attributed by Saint John to the crucified Christ – "I am the resurrection and the life" – repeated 55 times over as many lines, different letters erased from all but the last line to create a long, spatially atomised narrative, only finally resolved into clarity. "Message Clear" was published in the *TLS* on January 13, 1966. After some bemused letters to the editor, and many positive responses, Morgan extracted five more poems, from Burns's "To a Mouse", Brecht's "Von der Kindesmörderin Marie Farrar", Rimbaud's "Une Saison en Enfer", Dante's *Inferno* and the Communist Manifesto,

offering all six to Hansjörg Mayer on August 4, 1966 as an instalment in his Futura folding poster-poem series. "All the poems", Morgan noted, "are related in subject-matter though not always directly - to their final text-lines".

*Emergent Poems* achieve a fine balance of classical compositional rigour and provocative theme and narrative, rendered with a degree of rhetorical and emotional intensity reflecting the "strongly emotional impulse" under which the first emergent was written, as Morgan wrote to Day. This reincorporation of theme, narrative and perspective, facilitated by lexical range, together with the rhetorical orientation of many emergents away from or against the sense of their source phrases – and a graphic hint of diffusing particles or atoms – suggests a dispersal or slippage of meaning antithetical to classical ideals of linguistic reduction, enhanced by the source quotes' dispersal across six languages. But these are qualities achieved within classical expressive restraints – mechanistic, rule-based composition, a non-figurative, or rather, subtly figurative visual appearance – which ultimately makes their manifestation more striking. The poems' visual forms, moreover, enhance those qualities, through complementary visual metaphors, and by implying effects of diction or reading order which nuance the poems' themes.

"Message Clear" opens on a cry of apparent physical and mental anguish which undercuts the source-phrase's assertion of divine self-sufficiency, suggesting Christ's mortality.

```
  am              i
                                  if
i am                          he
     he r          o
     h     ur   t
    the re           and
     he      re
  a                 n   d
    the r                  e....
```

This narrative and thematic thrust is complemented by visual effect. The spread of words across lines – exaggerated by the composition of "there" from different letters on the sixth and ninth lines – generates an unstable, nebulous appearance, while seeming to transcribe the stuttering intonation of the dying – one who is hurt "there and here and there" – and of a self-doubting prophet: "if i am he". Multiple visual impressions of

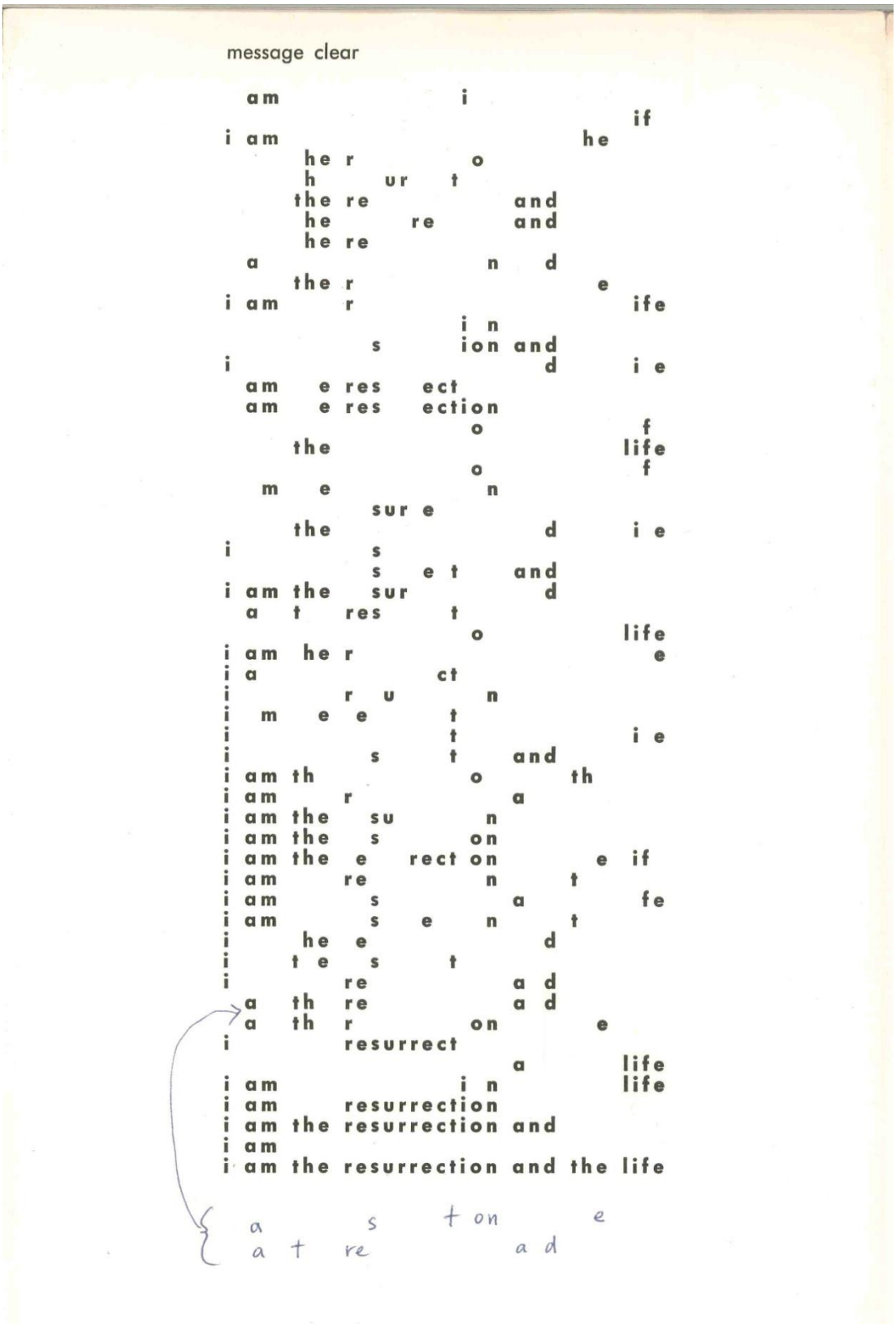



Fig. 9. “Message Clear”. *Emergent Poems*. This copy, from the Scottish Poetry Library’s Edwin Morgan Archive, shows Morgan’s corrections.

meaning and self in dissolution thus enhance the semantic sentiment, which is developed in the following lines:

```
i                          d       i e
  am    e res    ect
i am    e res    ection
                     o             f
      the                        life
                     o             f
   m    e             n....
```

The correct reading – "i die a mere sect, a mere section of the life of men" – seems both to lament an incomplete task of instruction and conversion, and to acknowledge the cultural relativity of religious doctrine: that prophets create "mere sects". But again, visual effect nuances this theme, the repeated, conjoined "am", an effect of visual coagulation, inviting the alternative scans "i am resect" and "i am a resection": references to the surgical removal of organs, suggesting self-sacrifice; the absorption of sin, or of the morally disruptive truths of cultural relativism. Another reading invited by visual scanning – "i am erect" – cultivates the same images of an embodied Christ as the following section – "i am here/ i act/ i run/ i meet" – without extinguishing its homoerotic energy by crassly stating itself. The monologue then enlarges on the idea of relative religious truths, and their potential to justify repression, by analogy with Pharaonic deities:

```
i am th             o       th
i am     r             a
i am the   su         n
i am the   s         on....
```

Foregoing sentiments are finally balanced in an unfurling of coherence which reveals Christ as simultaneously mortal and immortal:

```
i         resurrect
                        a        life
i am                 i n         life
i am      resurrection
i am the resurrection and
i am
i am the resurrection and the life
```

"i resurrect a life": besides returning his followers to life after death, Christ as allegory or role model is one means of rooting human behaviour in the ideal of godliness – "i am the surd', another section states – thus "resurrecting" it. Yet he remains simultaneously human, "in life". This narrative sequence, of great thematic depth and authorial depth, relies upon, and suggests, a dispersal of sense antithetical to the binding principles of classical poetics. Yet central to this effect are the complementary metaphors and ambiguous grammatical and intonational effects generated by the dispersed visual form: graphic space as structural agent. A prerequisite of classical poetics is turned to effects quite different from those for which it was conceived. Moreover, although the poem's narrative and thematic complexities pull against the rigid compositional framework, they are ultimately rendered more striking by their manifestation within it.

By similar means, "Dialeck Piece", as Morgan wrote to Mayer (August 4, 1966), teases obscure "Irish-English" idioms from Burns's "To a Mouse", a poem often taken to emblematise the lyrical richness of the Scots language. Morgan's source-phrase, "a daimen icker in a thrave" – an arcane allegory for the scarcity of good fortune, "daimen" meaning rare, "icker" an ear of corn, "thrave" a bundle of 24 sheaves – initially seems unrelated to the extracted poem. But Nicholson suggests that it reflects Burns's use as a cultural lodestar during the "synthetic Scots debate", citing a *Glasgow Herald* article of November 13, 1946 in which "MacDiarmid had allowed that contemporary writing 'may, like Burns, use an occasional phrase even many Scots do not understand without recourse to a dictionary – "e.g. a daimen icker in a thrave" ' " (94). Morgan's protagonist seems to be an Irish-Glaswegian policeman:

```
          i
a     m
      m   ick         th    e
  d i      ck
    i                  h ave
     me
     m             a t     e
                in
     me             a th
a       n
a d i      ck    i          e
  da    n        in    th    e
        n ick
```

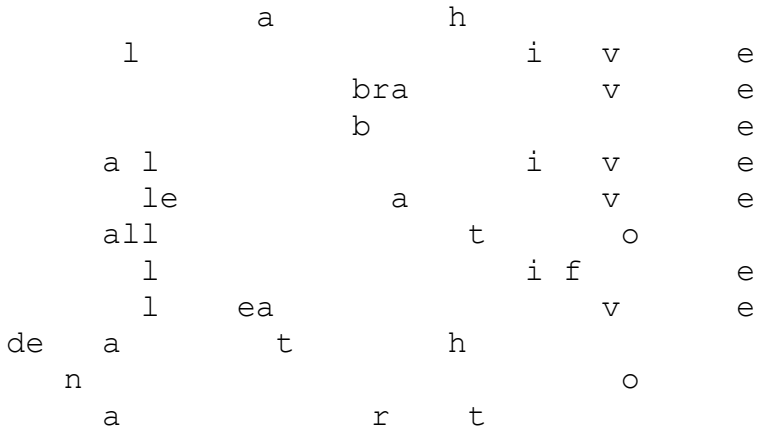
As Morgan noted to Mayer (August 4, 1966), "dick = detective; me = my; meath = Co. Meath in Ireland; an = and; dickie dan = fine fellow; nick = prison". The terms were not deliberately un-Scottish, he added, but reflected "the strong Scottish-Irish connection, particularly in the west of Scotland where I live". Accepting the source-quote's connection to MacDiarmid, the poem perhaps orients itself around his concept of "Gaeldom", another idea intended to form the basis of a rejuvenated Scottish cultural identity, outlined in "The Caledonian Antisyzygy and the Gaelic Idea" (1931-32) partly via an endorsement of Wyndham Lewis's reading of the National Socialist concept of "blutsgefühl". The manifestation of a transnational culture of "Gaeldom", MacDiarmid noted, did not involve excavating the common linguistic roots of Irish and Scots Gaelic, but in realising:

> [T]hat we are a Gaelic people, that Scottish anti-Irishness is a profound mistake, that we ought to be anti-English, and that we ought to play our part in a three-to-one policy of Scotland, Ireland and Wales against England to reduce that 'predominant partner' to its proper subordinate role in our internal and imperial affairs.…(334)

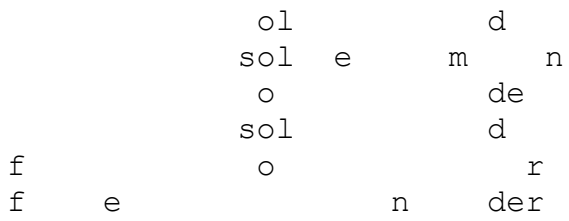
The concept was pro-Irish and Anglophobic to equal degrees, so Morgan's "Anglo-Irishisms" both enact and subvert the cultural brokering MacDiarmid calls for. Morgan implies the entwinement of Scottish and Irish culture, but suggests that they are also inextricably connected via the language and culture of Ireland's coloniser, English sharing linguistic roots with both Burns's Scots and Morgan's Anglo-Irish. Again, the complexity and specificity of the theme is rendered more striking by its emanation from within a constrictive compositional framework, the poem both subverting and extending the expressive potentials of classical concrete. Although that theme primarily reflects Morgan's complex relationship with MacDairmid's poetics and politics, visually oriented hints also imply bawdier constructions – "i have me mate in me" – perhaps related to the fact that Morgan's partners, as McGonigal notes, were generally working class Catholic men. These tributary channels of meaning reiterate the importance of classical visual device to these poems' semantic effects.

Other emergents put similar technical effects to work. "Plea" pares down Brecht's compassionate maxim regarding "the infanticide Marie Farrar" – "denn alle

kreatur braucht hilf von allen" ("because every creature needs help from all") – into a general credo of optimism and human engagement:




The more semantically recalcitrant "Seven Headlines", perhaps a tribute to Symbolist hermeticism, is a septet of headline-style statements extracted from Rimbaud's proleptic modernist statement "il faut être absolument moderne" ("one must be absolutely modern"). Some loosely suggest a similar drive for invention, notably the opening call to replace traditional verse forms with a poetry of exoskeletal grammar:




Perhaps it is the "fender" of concrete grammar which is feted here, a grammar endowed with great expressive potential in these emergents, which most consummately fulfil the imperative for effective concrete poetry outlined in Morgan's *Between Poetry and Painting* note: that although "their anatomy may be rigid and exoskeletal", there be "something living and provocative inside" ("Statement by Edwin Morgan" 71).

Shortly after composing *Emergent Poems*, Morgan created a series of "one word poems", variations on a theme devised by Finlay as the sole format for contributions to the final *POTH* (November 1967).[15] Writing to contributors on August 11, 1966, Finlay explained the "rules" of this language game:

> [P]oems should consist of one word only, together with a title of any length. These 2 elements must be thought of as 2 straight lines. They are connected, so we have A CORNER; the peculiarity of these corners is, that they are open on all sides.

The technique, that is, should generate aesthetic effects not reducible to either poem or title: not hemmed in by the straight lines creating the corner. Morgan's contributions to the issue – republished as *Nine One Word Poems* (1982) by Hamish Whyte's Mariscat Press – combine semantic homogeneity with lyrical linguistic expansiveness. Their extended titles draw out a theme suggested by the poem in a manner which both satirises and enriches an ascetic lexicon emblematic of classical concrete. The form's aptness to Morgan's off-concrete sensibility might reflect the influence upon its conception of his poem "From *The Dictionary of Tea*", composed on February 6, 1966 for *POTH*'s tea-themed twenty-third issue (July 1967), in which it appears in John Furnival's beautiful hand-lettering. The poem was probably sent to Finlay in spring 1966, shortly before the one word poem idea was conceived. A series of short, pseudo-dictionary entries with longer accompanying definitions, it suspends its compositional elements in a comparable manner, and is also discussed below.

These poems displayed with a new clarity the use Morgan was already making of titles as covert thematic signposts within concrete poems. The Noigandres and Gomringer had pointed out this tendency in letters, revealing clear distinctions between their own artistic imperatives and Morgan's. Commenting on "Unscrambling the Waves at Goonhilly", Augusto wrote (June 21, 1963):

> I doubt if the title is necessary,…many of our concrete poems are not at all descriptive. They rather try to give an image of movement itself. They are poems over the poem. So it is very difficult to give a title for them, and it would be even unnecessary. But of course, we also tried another experiences [sic.], and even an engageé concrete poetry….

Augusto's inference of the connection between titular contextualisation and polemic is noteworthy; Gomringer's response to Morgan's *Starryveldt* manuscript was similarly illuminating, notwithstanding his fractured English: "i like your narrative way with the titles – inspite it is not my own position to poetry" (June 27, 1964).

Many of Morgan's one word poems push this principle of titular framing to a comic extreme, in part satirising the notion that words could bear self-evident meanings

by showing their reliance upon their titles to yield any significance. Yet they somehow also salvage that idea in the process, by salvaging the values of those words. Others, moreover, achieve a finer expressive balance between poem and title, and thus between concrete and non-concrete effect, although "Homage to Zukofsky" is in the former camp:[16]

The

Other poems define their own theme, but rely on the title to poeticise it, through stylistic effects such as alliteration and rhyme normally reserved for a poem itself, as in these tributes:

Lattice, Lettuce, Ladders
Vasarely

Ada Nada Paradada
Dom

Despite this satirical orientation around the ideal of self-evident linguistic value – as if the title were obliged to generate effects the poem is incapable of – these pieces are not bald satire, as they would be if the title's meaning were bathetic or counterintuitive to the poem's. They rather cultivate a seed of meaning buried within it, unable to flower without being tended to by the surrounding words, thus lyrically enhancing concrete gesture. Nonetheless, the weighting of expressive responsibility towards their titles perhaps suggests an imperfect realisation of Finlay's principle. Other poems, however, achieve a finer equilibrium:

A Far Cool Beautiful Thing, Vanishing
blue

The "far cool beautiful thing" envisaged in this title is surely more so for being blue, the image generated thus irreducible to either title or poem, instead suspended in the space between them: a corner open on all sides.

Morgan's tea dictionary inverts the one word poems' title→poem structure, increasing comic possibilities by allowing joke→punchline style revelations.

Accordingly, unlike the one word titles, many of Morgan's definitions whimsically subvert those implied by their entries, although with more subtlety than mere punch-lines.[17] The phrase "tea top" turns out not to describe a smart jumper or a dining room sideboard, but a "musical, spinning samovar". Other definitions lead their entries further astray, reducing the word "tea" to merely metaphorical value:

> grey tea: used of a disappointment, E.g. 'Harriet got her grey tea that night.'
> brown bolus tea: an old-fashioned medicine, of which the true recipe has been lost ….

One does away with its title entirely:

> tea cat: species of giant toad found in South India; it is not a cat, and has no connection with tea….

These definitions comically exploit their power over the preceding words, implying language's vulnerability to interpretation, its contingency to the rules of the game, thereby querying the notion of self-sufficiently meaningful words. Others, however, reveal a less oblique attitude to their opening phrases, through lyrical descriptive enhancement:

> tea cloud: a high calm soft warm light gold cloud, sometimes seen at sunset….

In any case, these off-concrete poems suggest the reliance of the classical lexicon on rhetorical embellishment in a spirit of creative play more than critique.

Morgan's last exclusively concrete collection was *The Horseman's Word*, published by Duncan Glen's Akros Press in 1970. Glen had published Morgan's concrete collection *Gnomes* in 1968, and on July 17 that year wrote to Morgan suggesting a new sequence, initially intended to comprise six poster-poems. On August 17, 1969 Morgan sent Glen six prospective poems, with "a linking theme (the 'horseman's word')", but Glen could not produce the posters because the amount of word repetition prohibited the planned letterpress production, due to lack of type.[18] Glen suggested they form part of the press's Parkland Poets series instead, accompanied by four more poems, and set in typewriter font (August 19, 1969). Morgan sent the remaining poems on August 24,

commenting that "the typewriter type suits the spacing and patterning … (indeed I rather regard them as 'typewriter poems')".

The ten resulting pieces, composed August 15-24, 1969, re-establish the focus on animal communication inaugurated by Morgan's 1962-63 bestiary. Those earlier poems had used contextualising device to undermine the classical drive towards non-figurative graphics and universal semantics, in which context their theme seemed almost consciously arbitrary. But these more sophisticated impressions of animal expression, specifically equine, rely on classical concrete technique itself, particularly on formulaic, non-figurative graphic effects complemented by their typewritten appearance. In this context the animal theme more integrally reflects the motive peripheral to that earlier sequence: to represent non-human dimensions of communication in order to trouble metaphysical readings of human communication and thought itself. The implication is reinforced by frequent shifts in narrative perspective from horse to human, suggesting the two species' containment on a single spectrum of sentience: this is the quality assessed below, following consideration of the sequence's visual effects.

Those effects, moving beyond simplistic pictorial device, indicate a more earnest desire to make the poems' subjects "speak" than had Morgan's earlier animal poems. This perhaps reflects the lifelong fascination with horses later expressed in more sinister poems such as "A Water Horse" (1991) and "Horsemen" (2010), one of Morgan's last compositions. Citing those later poems, McGonigal suggests various reasons for Morgan's interest: the traditionally "deep relationship between man and horse"; the animal's numinous and apocalyptic associations in Celtic and Christian mythology, drawn on in those later pieces (4-5); and perhaps primarily, the equine-human language reputedly practised by the Society of the Horseman's Word, the clandestine fraternal order after which Morgan named this collection, whose meetings Hamish Henderson had attended during field recording trips in spring 1952 (Neat 3-8). His biographer Timothy Neat states:

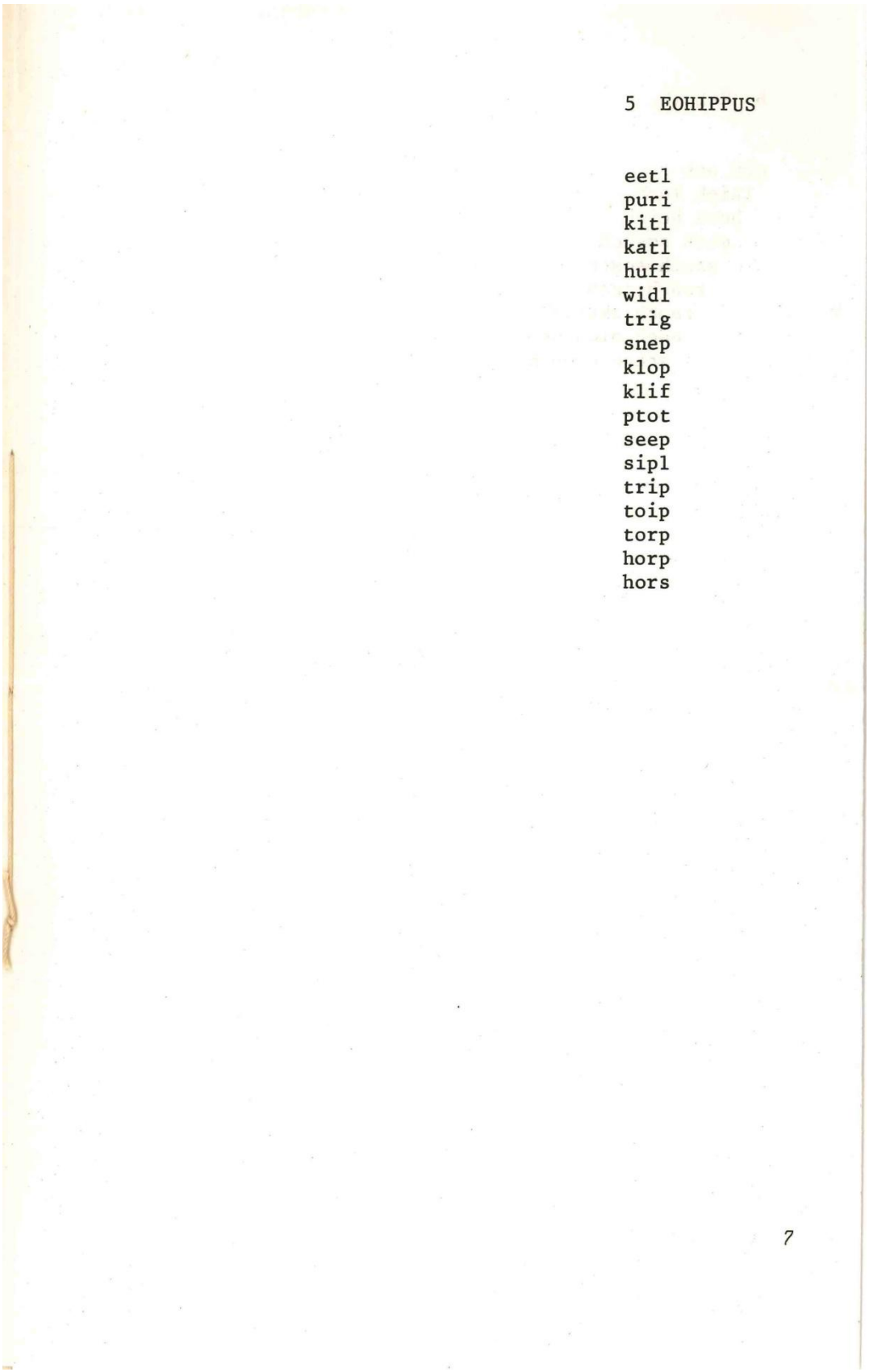
> The Horseman's Word was the name given to an ancient society of horsemen, ploughmen, farrowers and blacksmiths centred on north-east Scotland. Hamish saw the society as the continuance of a primordial horse-cult adapted to nineteenth-century agricultural practices. Rights and rituals were jealously guarded, and the Brotherhood was a depository of ancient lore of great veterinary and literary interest. (4)

Morgan's interest in the order's fabled interspecific language reflects the fascination with translating non-human expression evident across his concrete repertoire; connecting this collection to the order, and thus to horses, partly acknowledged this preoccupation. McGonigal also notes, paraphrasing Alec Finlay, that Henderson and Morgan might have used references to its homosocial ceremonies to "hint at gay subculture", although that allusion seems peripheral to this sequence (335).

In any case, Morgan uses more probing means of attempting to bridge the human-equine experiential chasm than calligramme-esque mimesis, as if the horse bore a level of sentience which that somewhat childish method failed to recognise.[19] Instead, graph-like compositions, allusive of genetic-code charts, seem to evoke the underlying biological characteristics producing the creature's outward appearance and behaviour, most clearly in "Eohippus" (fig. 10). As John Holmes notes in a survey of poetic responses to Darwinism, this poem depicts the evolution of the horse from the "diminutive, undistinguished, four-toed ancestor" Eohippus or "dawn horse" – the four-letter rows perhaps a homage to its toes – to the "swift, tall, handsome, one-toed *Equus*", the genus encompassing modern horses: one of evolution's "iconic myths" (29). Random, tabulated grammatical shifts allegorise the genetic forward leaps and cul-de-sacs between prehistory and present, while jokily invoking a "wonder horse" of wild west cinema: "t r i g". The final line, "h o r s", following a three-step grammatical accretion, suggests the eventual inception and proliferation of the successful genus. The poem doubles, however, as an onomatopoeic rendering of the snorts and trots of a single animal rapidly expanding in size, resolved into language by that final, clipped line, thereby overlaying human and equine communication.

A vaguer association of scientific monitoring is generated by another graph-like poem, "Newmarket", which also opts for onomatopoeic rendering of its subject, drawing energy from syncopated impressions of a racehorse's strides:

```
tk-tke
tk-tke
tk-tke
tk-tke
tk-tke
tk-tke
tk-tke
hs-hss
hs-hss
```



5 EOHIPPUS

eetl
puri
kitl
katl
huff
widl
trig
snep
klop
klif
ptot
seep
sipl
trip
toip
torp
horp
hors

7

Fig. 10. “Eohippus”. *The Horseman’s Word*.

But as in "Eohippus", horse and human expression commingle in single lines, initially through the blending of hoofbeats into whipcracks – "hs-hss"; "ws-wss" – and, at the end of the poem, by their transformation into the jockey's cajolinging, rewarding voice:

km-kmm
km-kmm
km-kmm
k-monn
k-monn
k-monn
k-monn
a-tsit

Besides suggesting a newly sophisticated rendering of animal expression through the scientific associations of their non-figurative graphics – and thus, in combination with reintegrated theme and narrative, turning classical device to contextual purpose – these poems also show the expressions of Equus and Homo sapiens intermingling: it is no coincidence that one of Morgan's protagonists is a centaur.

Throughout the sequence, this melding process generates references to human language and culture spanning, as McGonigal notes, "Scottish, Norse, North American, Greek, English and Hungarian sounds, images and myths" alongside equine language and movement (210). "Clydesdale" traps the frantic patter of a trainer of Lanarkshire-bred horses, through urgent imperatives and affectionate nicknames:

go
  fetlocksnow
            go
              gullfurrow
                        go

go
  brassglow
          go
            sweatflow
                    go

At the same time, onward-running lineation, rhymes and stress-patterns translate the horse's movements, integrating equine and human until a final line suggesting the pair have overshot their destination:

```
go
  Balerno
         go
           Palermo
                  whoa
```

Morgan's focus on human communication often involves dialect, as in "Kelpie" which, as Nicholson states, evokes a "lowland Scots water-spirit usually appearing as a horse" (93). The poem's onomatopoeiac qualities, which suggest a horse-like creature writhing and munching in a swamp, disguise the words' values as Scots nouns and adjectives, reflecting the myth's geographical origins (ibid.):

```
och och
 laich loch
  hoch heich
   moch smeuch
    sauch souch....
```

The closing line, "stech enuech", translated by Nicholson as "gorged enough", implies the conclusion of a feast in both horse snort and human speech.

The title of "Hortobágy" refers to a vast, horse-populated steppe in eastern Hungary, perhaps a memory from Morgan's 1966 visit to the country. The poem consists of a single diagonal stroke formed from the repeated Hungarian word for horse, "ló", spanning from top-left to bottom-right margin, visually suggesting a gallop across a plane, or the sweep of a mane. These animal evocations are complemented by an accent-lengthened open syllable evoking a herder's cries, the poem bringing the two species into a coexistence encapsulated by its subtle pictographic evocation of a rider whipping its steed: ló. The collection's broader merging of human and equine worlds, however whimsical, achieves a serious goal of Morgan's off-concrete style: to depict a universe populated by sentient beings exceeding the merely human, thereby undermining exclusionary religious or metaphysical accounts of the origins of human thought and communication itself.

Sonic concrete

On August 7-8, 1969, just before composing *The Horseman's Word,* Morgan wrote "Blues and Peal: Concrete 1969", for a 1970 issue of Nicholas Zurbrugg's magazine *Stereo Headphones* subtitled "The Death of Concrete". A permutational series of word-pairs teetering between semantic sense and random juxtaposition, it plays out the tension between concrete's formalist and expressionist elements while generating associations of energy simultaneously replenished and extinguished:

> concrete is dancing
> concrete is trying
>
> karting is daunting
> karting is tiring
>
> dying is karting
> dying is tiring….

The poem partly seems a postscript to concrete poetry, and to a decade of counter-cultural energy – "dancing is tiring/ trying is daunting" –, but it ends on an ambiguous rising note: "concrete is whing". This suggests a launch into orbit, perhaps implying that concrete's evasion of the gravitational pull of conventional semantics had propelled it beyond the possibility of continued use.[20] An earlier letter to Zurbrugg (September 25, 1967) had expressed a similar uncertainty regarding its longevity, "whether concrete will continue to develop as an almost separate art or whether it will be absorbed by (after having an influence on) the general art of poetry". Certainly, Morgan's relatively few bold forays into his visually preoccupied 1960s lexicon in works of the 1970s and after suggest that as "a separate art", concrete's function was waning by 1970, although its fleeting adoption in sequences such as "The New Divan" (1977) does suggest absorption into the general art.[21]

However, that closing lift-off might also suggest that concrete's grammatical idiosyncrasy presaged the evolution of human grammar itself in the new frontier of space. This reading allows us to connect the poem to Morgan's development, throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s, of a more sonically preoccupied variant of concrete poetry, designed to capture the contours of speech in real and imagined realms

both earth-bound and intergalactic. Aspects of this work's evolution, if not its conception, were influenced by global and local shifts in poetic aesthetics in the late 1960s and early 1970s, discussed in turn below: the worldwide burgeoning of the sound poetry movement, and the largely Glasgow-centred development of new kinds of poetry in dialect, which anchored comparable sound-effects to specific social contexts. The poems which these influences helped to shape indicate an off-concrete contextualisation of sound poetry similar to the contextualisation of classical concrete in Morgan's 1960s poems.

The fundamental characteristic of sound poetry – whose origins as a movement are touched on in my final chapter – is a level of attention to the non-semantic dimensions of audible language comparable to concrete's emphasis on the visual dimensions of writing. However, as Scobie notes, because of the more evanescent nature of its material, it tended more than visual concrete towards "the open-ended, improvisational", "mov[ing] into the flux and uncertainty of language set free" (*Earthquakes* 151). For Scobie this ensured its survival in the burgeoning culture of deconstruction which toppled classical concrete's logocentric foundations: "[s]ound provides the 'post' (perhaps the last post) for Concrete Poetry on the edge of postmodernism" (ibid.).

Perhaps as a result, following the concrete movement's late-1960s demise, the sound poetry movement, concrete's "poor cousin" in the 1960s, "flourished in the 1970s, culminating in a series of major international festivals (Toronto, 1978; New York, 1980)" (ibid.). The "Death of Concrete" *Stereo Headphones* number was emblematically followed in Spring 1971 by a sound poetry special, to which Morgan contributed the poem "Zoo", whose opening line, "humpback / haversack / Heidsieck / ho", pays homage to one of the genre's French pioneers. Consciously international, the sound poetry movement was primarily connected to the UK via London – largely through Bob Cobbing and Writers Forum – where the seventh, eighth and ninth International Festivals of Sound Poetry were held between 1974 and 1976, part of the series whose final, North American instalments Scobie refers to.[22] But it also reached Scotland, where Tom Leonard had been creating tape-recorder-based sound poetry since 1968, after hearing a radio broadcast of Cobbing's poem "Are Your Children Safe in the Sea?", subsequently participating in the 1975 festival in London (Leonard "How I Became a Sound-Poet" 44). In 1978, Leonard and Joan Hughson organised Sound and Syntax, a

three-day international sound poetry festival in Glasgow, at which Morgan appeared on a bill with the Viennese poets Ernst Jandl and Gerhard Rühm, also designing the festival poster.

Morgan's involvement with these activities played into his increasing deployment of concrete poetry's sonic and musical possibilities from the late 1960s onwards, but belies complexities in the resulting – and preceding – work not accountable for solely by recourse to sound poetry aesthetics. The sound poets' self-reflexivity regarding linguistic value, that is, tended to be counterbalanced by, perhaps even to generate, a compulsion to access its immediate or trans-mediate dimensions, an urge towards universals which tended to render language a homogenous entity, missing the potential local or contextual resonances of syntactical or morphological constructions. Morgan's sonic concrete poems, by contrast, always evoke specific linguistic territories or scenarios, many of them pointedly Scottish.

This characteristic is better assessed in relation to the poetry in dialect practised by various young Scottish writers, including Leonard and Stephen Mulrine, from the late 1960s onwards, which shared sound poetry's neologising energy but used it not to evade context but to attempt to transcribe the speech of real communities with unprecedented accuracy. The orthographic contortions needed to do so, at least in Leonard's work, revealed the exclusion of that speech from conventions of writing, allegorising the socioeconomic subjugation of those communities. This mutated orthography could thus be pugnaciously wielded as a marker of alienation from, and antagonism towards, conventional "poetic" communities seen as complicit with that subjugation, as Leonard's "Good Style", the last of his *Six Glasgow Poems* (1968), makes clear:

> helluva hard tay read theez init
> stull
> if yi canny unnirston thim jiss clear aff then
>
> gawn
> get tay fuck ootma road….

This wave of activity, somewhat comparable to the development of concrete "dialect poetry" in Vienna in the 1950s-60s by Gerhard Rühm, Friedrich Achleitner and H.C. Artmann, was centred around Glasgow, especially Morgan's workplace Glasgow University. Morgan welcomed it, particularly poetry which seemed to crystallise

Glaswegian speech and culture with unprecedented authenticity, praising Leonard's "compression-pump injection of whole miniature sociologies and philosophies into real and rude Glasgow speech" ("Glasgow Writing" 5). He captured it as an editor in the 1967 Akros anthology *Four Glasgow University Poets* (1967), and in the annual *Scottish Poetry* series which he co-edited during 1966-72, then "the most public forum for work coming out of Glasgow University", printing another of Leonard's *Glasgow Poems*, "The Good Thief", in 1970 (Robin Hamilton "Edwin Morgan as Teacher" 123).

The origins of Morgan's sonic concrete poetry can be traced back beyond both these developments, to early-1960s poems probably more influenced by Finlay's *Glasgow Beasts*, or the MacDiarmid of "Water Music". But their development owes something to both the decontextualised soundscapes of poets such as Cobbing and Henri Chopin, and the socio-politically loaded phonetics of Leonard et al. The immediately apparent pleasure they take in sheer noise conceals a fundamental concern with capturing dialect within that noise: characteristics of speech specific to particular contexts, either realistic and socio-geographically rooted, or extraordinary imagined environments in which conventional grammar mutates and expands.

The first of these two definitions implicates poems exploring dialect in the everyday sense; such poems often record Scottish, and especially Glaswegian sound-worlds, but are not necessarily confined by regional or national boundaries. Indeed, a division between attention to national and international languages provides a convenient way of ordering discussion of these poems. In the first case, Morgan had been ranging over Scottish soundscapes in what are arguably sonic concrete poems since the early 1960s, generally not publishing them in concrete collections, perhaps because their slimmer visual element seemed to place them outside the genre as defined by classical style. "Meeloney's Reply to McBnuigrr", from *POTH* 3 (June 1963) is exemplary, a slew of punch-drunk phrases penned in response to Pete Brown's "McBnuigrr's Speech", printed in issue one:

> B'OIGJABBRSMAC – fcatchoo bfck bfcuttchling
> mdeirdras mdeirackache bfckoil
> kll oil capscoil....

These sounds have no explicit semantic value. But rather than indicating a compulsion to the non-mediate, this weighting of language's sonic substance gestures, in comically

chaotic and perhaps stereotypical fashion, towards the phonetic range of a generic Scottish dialect. The impression is bolstered by continual hints of the prefix "Mc", and the repeated pseudo-grammatical structures – "bfck", "fc", "md" – which bury the sequence in a wave of near-expletives.

From the late 1960s, Morgan began incorporating such poems into his collected concrete roster, suggesting both a keener rate of composition related to the paradigm shifts noted above, and an alteration in his sense of the parameters of concrete style itself. This was perhaps related to the broader shift away from classical aesthetics outlined in my second chapter, one upshot of which was the blurring of boundaries between sound and concrete poetry. Poems similar to "Meeloney", conspicuously absent from *Starryveldt*, form a key part of the concrete contribution to Morgan's first major collection *The Second Life* (1968). One such piece, "Canedolia", composed December 26-27, 1963, emblematically opens the first of the discrete "concrete sections" marked out by grey pages in that collection, having previously appeared in the "Changing Guard" *TLS*.[23] This poem, whose subtitle, "An Off-Concrete Scotch Fantasia", connects Morgan's off-concrete concern with context with his desire to "register the reality of Scotland", renders concrete the stuff of audition rather than vision: specifically a tool for mapping Scottish phonetics, although unusually for Morgan, it turns its attention to the county's Celtic linguistic roots. Enigmatic interview-style questions – another technique for contextualising sound poetry, by ascribing its effects to a characterised respondent, as in "Interview" (1979) and "The Mummy" (1977) – incite responses consisting of musical flurries of place-names, many of them Gaelic: real words, unlike Meeloney's, but bent to new grammatical uses. Some become personal names (21):

> *who saw?*
> rhu saw rum. garve saw smoo. nigg saw tain. lairg saw lagg. rigg saaw eigg. largs saw haggs. tongue saw luss. mull saw yell. stoer saw strone. drem saw muck. gask saw noss. unst saw cults. echts saw banff. weem saw wick. trool saw twatt….

Others become adjectives (ibid.):

> *what is it like there?*
> och it's freuchie, it's faifley, it's wamphray, it's frandy, it's sliddery….

These words are bound together by inferred emotional associations disconnected from their normal meanings, presaging sound poets' efforts to access Zaum-like realms of non-semantic linguistic value. But intelligible geographical references prevent a wholly non-referential or musical effect. The new-minted qualities of sound poetry rather encase specific, regional references, as in the nonce word "Canedolia" itself.

By the time Morgan published *From Glasgow to Saturn* (1973), the visual off-concrete phase documented in *Starryveldt* had largely passed, but this concern with sound and dialect, particularly Scottish dialect, had to some extent revitalised his off-concrete aesthetic. In poems such as "The Loch Ness Monster's Song", reprinted from *Twelve Songs* (1970), it is largely comic in import. A quasi-coherent monologue similar to Meeloney's strikes a tone of rage and confusion suggesting both a beast disturbed from slumber, and an expletive-peppered rant in a Glaswegian dialect akin to those traced in Leonard's poetry, doubly contextualising the effects of sound poetry while still dipping a toe in its swamp of pure noise. But "The First Men on Mercury", composed in January 1970, first published in 1971, although still a whimsical affair, clarifies the political potential of grafting dialect, especially Scottish dialect, onto sonic concrete grammar, rendering its noisiness a marker of social exclusion akin to Leonard's Glaswegian orthography. The dialogue form which offsets standard and regional voices in "Canedolia" here frames a conversation between Mercurians and R.P. speaking Earthmen (63):

> – We come in peace from the third planet.
> Would you take us to your leader?
>
> – Bawr Stretter! Bawr. Bawr. Stretterhawl?
>
> – This is a little plastic model
> of the solar system, with working parts.
> You are here and we are there and we
> are now here with you, is this clear?
>
> – Gawl horrop. Bawr. Abawrhannahanna!....

This is partly a general commentary on the relationship between linguistic and socio-political power. The Mercurians' responses bear the grammatical trappings of a language, but that language seems to be rendered noise, initially by its foreignness, then

by an attempted repression of its use coextensive with social domination, as they are taught to speak English instead: "we call the brown here 'land', the blue is 'sea', and the white is 'clouds'…. " (ibid.). The earthmen's linguistic coherence, by contrast, connotes the capacity to control and direct others: linguistic intelligibility thus becomes both a measure and determinant of socio-political status. However, as Russell Jones notes, Morgan's Mercurian is also loaded with the phonetic tics of Scots, even approximations of its slang, honing this critique into an allegory for Anglo-Scottish relations: " 'Bawr' translates into standard English as 'practical joke' … 'stretter' is remarkably similar to 'strett' which means 'straight' … 'hawl' closely resembles 'haw' which translates as 'livid' or 'pale' "(n.p.). That the earthmen are perhaps the butt of a practical joke makes this subtext seem jokily sceptical, rather than resentful, of the assumed domination of the English language and social order over those of its partner nation; as does the fact that they eventually leave speaking Mercurian. Nonetheless, this subtext confirms that Morgan's sonic concrete poems exploring Scottish dialect do not simply indicate the sound poet's delight in flooding language systems with noise, nor necessarily just a general solidarity with particular languages and the social realities inscribed in them. They can also represent a sense of sound poetry's noisiness as a marker of the historic subjugation of a particular language's speakers. That another of Morgan's sonic concrete poems uses Shakespeare's Caliban as its protagonist supports these inferences of sound poetry as socially repressed expression ("Caliban Falls Asleep in the Isle Full of Noises").

However, those poems which cast their net beyond Scottish dialects counterbalance that conclusion, suggesting a purely aesthetic interest in the phonetic patterning of different tongues which can be read back into the above poems. Returning to *The Second Life*, "Boats and Places", composed in March 1965 and initially printed that year in *POTH* 15 surrounded by Margot Sandeman's drawings of port-codes, is a collection of succinct, nautically themed permutational-esque poems which catches snippets of lexicon and speech-pattern from a global range of languages. Part four affects the dipthong-less phonemes of oriental languages, working in references such as "junk" and "sam pan", a flat-bottomed Chinese boat:

junk tug shag wee tow
bank two carp long catch

sam pan bet men go
oh ho
Hong Kong crow sing snatch

The second navigates from "Greek", via rhyme and homophone, to "caïque", a type of rowing boat found on the Aegean and Ionian seas:

Greek
creek
creak
caïque

Part three concerns central Asia, casting off from "dhow", an arabic sailing vessel, through alliterative onomatopoeia encompassing an Indian city – "Howrah" – to reach "howdah", an elephant-back carriage:

dhow
whoa
Howrah
hurrah
howdah
andhow

Through gentler sound-waves than "Canedolia", this sequence makes comparable use of the musical or material patterning of speech-sound to explore various tropics of dialect; but this contextualisation of the effects of sound poetry seems compelled more by a wide-eyed interest in particulars – particular dialects, particular cultural references – than any political impetus.

Other sonic concrete poems present dialect not as a result of socio-geographic origin, but of sudden technological or environmental alteration of a communicative state, most obviously through space travel. One earth-bound prototype for these explorations of dialect in the second sense is the *Starryveldt* poem "O Pioneers!", composed April 13, 1963, which playfully suggests the gurgling grammar of the tunnel-wall engraving copied into Morgan's scrapbook – reprinted as its preface – to be the result of inundation in the English Channel, working through various water-swilling permutations:

Tannel Chunnel begum
8018. Shart Willum

Tennal Chennul gbung.
8081. Shant Willung….

They become more and more exaggerated – the penultimate stanza reading "Chuntenlannel begubnugn 8810./ Blunt Wuglbumlugmn" – until a final line set nine thousand years in the future: "10880. Brigde bugn".

The more topical sequence inaugurated with "Spacepoem 1: From Laika to Gagarin", composed on July 28, 1964 in tribute to the first canine and human space flights of 1957 and 1961, deals with the mutation of language in extra-terrestrial environs. These poems express the fascination with space travel evident in the newspaper cuttings which saturate Morgan's scrapbooks, and also recounted in numerous interviews. "With space exploration", he noted to Robert Crawford, "it was as if for the first time life was really catching up with science fiction, and somehow it seemed to be more of a subject for poetry" ("Nothing is Not Giving Messages" 134). To Walker, Morgan distinguished between two types of poetry which the new experiential vistas of space travel might demand, one "a simple, even perhaps romantic kind of poetry" involving "something of the epic adventure of exploration", the second "more willing to use the specifics in the situation as far as possible and therefore to have to use technological language" ("Let's Go" 67). If sci-fi served the first purpose, concrete largely fulfilled the second, in the capacity of its neologistic grammatical structures to serve as shells for new words: descriptions of new worlds. Part of this was that the page-space emphasised by its visual syntax could become a visual metaphor for intergalactic space: as Morgan noted in *Peace News*, concrete poetry "takes *space* as a key-word, whether it's the use now being made of space in poetry and art, or the actual exploration of space which sets Gagarin as the Adam of a new era" ("Concrete Poetry" 7). That metaphorical potential was exploited in "Spacepoem 3: Off Course", first published in Clark Coolidge's *Joglars* (1966) before reappearing in *From Glasgow to Saturn*, and the *New Divan* poem "Space Sonnet and Polyfilla", both of which depict visually arranged units of text breaking apart as if in zero gravity.[24] But Morgan's first and most complex instalment in the spacepoem sequence is characterised more by sonic than graphic rendering of extra-terrestrial communication. Morgan revealed this intention in

a letter to Cavan McCarthy (January 26, 1965), who had suggested that a draft of the poem be made more visually striking, citing Furnival's text murals as an exemplar:

> I am doing something different: to me the words and sounds are important and must emerge clearly, to JF they are more like bricks with which he builds and often they are set askew or overlaid so that they cannot be read.... Be not afeard, the isle is full of voices (or noises) – I wanted a succession of different noises/voices mechanical human scrambled/clear all the way through….

This sonic emphasis – again, we can sense Caliban's influence – perhaps explains why this poem was also withheld from *Starryveldt*, but included in *The Second Life*.

As Morgan's reference to a "mechanical human" split suggests, "Spacepoem 1", despite its preoccupation with technological alterations of speech in space – or rather, in transmission back from space – engages with dialect in both the senses defined above. In fact, it typifies the alteration rather than eradication of existing languages through the interference of new environments to which Hamilton refers. An ingeniously multi-layered opening concatenation of staccato phonemes, dissecting and repeating the Russian words for rocket – "raketa" – and satellite – "sputnik" – while mimicking the "beep beep" audio communications of early space voyages, suggests both the geographical origins and chopped-up transmissions of an orbiting cosmonaut's speech:

> ra ke ta ra ke ta ra ke ta ra ke ta ra ke ta ra ke ta
> sputsputsputsputsputsputsputsputsputsputsputsputsputsput
> nik lai nik bel nik strel nik pchel nik mush nik chernush nik zvezdoch
> kakakakakakakakakakakakakakakakakakakakakakakakakakakaka….

However, the opening line, which invokes its poetic heritage by mimicking the "rakete bee bees" and "rakete rinnzeketes" of Schwitters's *Ursonate,* doubles as a series of canine yelps, suggesting that the poem's main character might not be human; although an emphasis on human dialect still pertains. That suggestion is strengthened in the third line, which names in abbreviated form the Soviet "space dogs" by order of mission – Laika, Belka, Strelka, Pchelka, Mushka, Chernushka, Zvezdochka – creating a narrative collage of canine space shots. Over the following seven lines, various compound-words are forged using a common grammatical framework, each gravitating around one dog's name:

nikka laika kalai kanikka kanaka kana sput
nikka belka kabel kanikka kanaka kana stup
nikka strelka kastrel kanikka kanaka kana pust….

Perhaps riffing off the Soviet Premier Nikita Krushchev's name, the opening "nikka" sets up each line's intonational pattern. A particular dog's name is then repeated twice, its syllables switched on reiteration, followed by a musical filler hinting at the word "canine" – "kanikka kanaka kana" – and finally, an anagram of "sput". A bridge of shuffled English translations of the dogs' names follows: "barker" (Laika); "whitie" (Belka); "arrow" (Strelka); "bee" (Pchelka); "spot" (Mushka); "blackie" (Chernushka); "star" (Zvezdochka) (ibid.):

barker whitiearrow beesport blackie star
whitie arrowbarker beeblackie star spot
arrow barkerbee whitiestar blackie spot….

Morgan's scrapbooks contain newspaper photographs of sputniks passing over the Queensferry skyline (*Scrapbook 14*, 2782): this folksy interlude perhaps suggests translated audio-feedback. Thus Morgan's first stanza, notwithstanding its canine theme, blends together futuristic and regionally specific phonetic patterns to suggest the synthesis of old and new features of human speech in space. The second shifts focus to Laika's human successor, with similar results, this stanza studded with Russian syllables related to Gagarin's flight on Vostock 1:

dakakvos dakakvos dakakvos dakakvos dakakvos dakakvos
davostok davostok davostok davostok davostok davostok
dadadadadadadadadadadadadadadadadadadadadadadadadadadada
daga daga daga daga daga daga daga daga daga daga daga….

The repeated incantation "dada" forges a clearer literary historical link, before new and used syllables are strung together to create a series of heroic, comic closing expostulations:

vostok! mir! vladi! yuri! mir! vladi! vladimir! vladivostock! yurimirny
vladimirny! yurilaika! nikitaraketa! balalaika!
raketasobakaslava! vladislava!

"Raketasobakaslava" welds together "raketa" (rocket), "sobak" (dog) and "slava" (glory); "balalaika", as well as a Russian stringed instrument, is also a modified portmanteau of "Belka" and "Laika". These rackety neologisms typify the protrusion of regional, rustic references throughout the poem, rendering dialect a synthesis of the effects of linguistic origin and present environment which mirrors both the off-concrete synthesis of classical and contextual device in Morgan's visual concrete works, and the similar orientation of his sonic concrete poems in relation to sound poetry. The references punctuating this poem, that is, place it ostentatiously in a genealogy of Dadaist sound poems, but this is not a sound poem in the abstract: it is a sound poem set in space.

What such evasive stylistic sashays reveal, like the evasion of a purely visual concrete aesthetics which such poems also represent, is a desire to let the context of the concrete poem define its content rather than vice versa. The deeper concerns revealed by this compulsion seem nebulous, but two aims persistently reassert themselves: to use the concrete poem to register specific ethical and political commitments, many of them nationalistic in orientation; and to render realms of non-human or extended human cognition in order to undermine metaphysically rooted portrayals of human language and thought. These two imperatives might seem subtly contradictory, the earnest polemical and ethical investments of the first at odds with the cool sense of human sentience and its attendant emotional and moral co-ordinates as a product of habit and environment implied by the second. More positively, we might see them as catalysts of the creative and ethical tension evident across the broader sweep of Morgan's poetic oeuvre, often seen as the guarantor of its Whittrick-like appeal: a dance of subjective impulse and qualifying technical device to whose development Morgan's off-concrete poetics were surely essential.

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[1] References to archived material or papers in this chapter refer to these papers unless otherwise stated.

[2] *Sealwear* is discussed in my article "From Edinburgh to Saturn: The Edwin Morgan Archive at the Scottish Poetry Library" (65-66).

[3] A single numbering system is used throughout the scrapbooks, hence this high figure. Confusingly it does not correspond to the order of the books.

[4] This lecture transcript, held with Morgan's Glasgow papers, was perhaps written for the December 1964 talk in Glasgow to which McGonigal refers (165), possibly the one

which Morgan stated was attended by Forrest-Thomson. Sections are identical to the archived transcript for a talk, "Concrete Poetry", broadcast on the *Third Programme* on January 24, 1965 – that date is provided to Charles Cameron in a letter of February 14, 1965 – perhaps that which McGonigal speculates was Forrest-Thomson's actual introduction (165). The lecture transcript also formed the basis of the articles entitled "Concrete Poetry" in *Peace News* and Bergonzi's *Innovations* (1968).

[5] See his quote on page 26.

[6] These are the earliest composed concrete poems according to the notes attached to Morgan's Glasgow University holograph collection, probably provided by Morgan, which date them to 1962-63. None were seemingly written after July 1963, as all of them either appear in *Fish-Sheet* or, according to Morgan and Augusto's correspondence, in *Invenção* 3, both published by that time; or they are written on the same draft-sheets as poems which do.

[7] Because of "financial troubles", Gomringer added, Morgan would have to buy his own copies for sale at a profit. Gomringer had also planned to publish Finlay in the same series of texts (Konkrete Poesie Poesia Concreta) but Finlay could not afford this publication method.

[8] Morgan was aware of the *Calligrammes* as a precedent for both pictorial and animal poetry; his translations of Apollinaire's "Bestiary" appear in *POTH* 11 (October 1964).

[9] Morgan's translation, sent with a letter to Sharkey of August 20, 1965, appears in Reichardt's *Cybernetic Serendipity* (1968), produced to accompany her 1968 computer-art exhibition of the same name.

[10] "The Computer's First Code Poem", composed March 1968 and first published in Hayden Murphy's *Broadsheet* that May, critiques the idea of an expression stripped of ambiguity in a different way. Morgan encrypts various six-word phrases which remain obdurately surreal even after they are "decoded", suggesting language's recalcitrant complexity. "TEYZA PRQTP ZSNSX OSRMY VCFBO VJSDA", for example, becomes "PROLE SNAPS LIVID BINGO THUMB TWICE"; this decryption relies on McGonigal's (237).

[11] Morgan was responding to a questionnaire regarding the relationship between the concrete poet and typographer; Zurbrugg eventually published extracts from the replies in *Second Aeon* in 1972 ("Four Years After").

[12] The exchange alludes to a difference of opinion which hardened into a dispute when Weaver wrote to the *TLS* on March 7, 1968, contending that an article by Willett praising Morgan's work indicated Willett's misunderstanding of concrete style: "[t]he weakest poets of the movement have insisted on the artist's dubious prerogative to be confused. The best, like Gomringer, Jandl and Finlay, know precisely what they are doing at the structural level. Our man at the *TLS*, bountiful though he may be, remains committed to the literary jokes and formal triviality of Morgan…." Morgan wrote to Finlay on March 10:

> [W]hat on earth has got into Mike Weaver? I was astonished by his attack on me. I know perfectly well that <u>some</u> of my concrete poems could be called 'literary jokes' but it is unjust to say that is all I have done, and anyone who really knows my work should be able to distinguish the grades and levels. My goodness, you never know your friends do you? His whole letter was, I thought, in any case far too dogmatic and certainly far too narrow in its distinctions.

"Into the Constellation" tempers and hones the terms of the disagreement, linking the prerogative of "purity" in Weaver's "Concrete Poetry" (1966) to political impotence:

> How expressionist may a constructivist poem be?...Mike Weaver … took his position … it might be argued too firmly …[:] 'Concrete Poetry is an aesthetic movement in poetry, only indirectly concerned with moral, social, and psychological values. This is not to say that concrete art and poetry are not fully committed to the improvement of the environment, but only the Brazilians and the Czechs have shown any inclination for social or political engagement.' Well, that 'only' is pretty bland, considering the very widespread impact and distinctive qualities of these two schools of poets, and in any case one cannot brush aside 'moral, social, and psychological values' so long as the medium in question is linguistic. (24)

[13] In general, Morgan seems to have been wary of collaboration. He also recalled a previous concern to Zurbrugg regarding the typographical treatment of "Opening the Cage" in Hansjörg Mayer's *Concrete Poetry Britain Canada United States* (1966): "I had no say in the printing … and the results came as a surprise. Although it … made a good visual impact, I did not myself think that the typographer's rearrangement of the word spacing improved the poem". Morgan and Jonathan Williams had discussed similar issues in reference to a version of *Siesta of a Hungarian Snake* being designed by Illinois typography students for Williams's Jargon Press. "They did tend to be 'interpretations' of the poem", Williams wrote: "[n]o one got the point of the bulge in the typescript which indicated why the bloody serpent was taking a siesta....I liked best the solution that worked like a Japanese book, with the snake slithering from page to page, then opening up in length. But, it too, is <u>not</u> the poem as you wrote it" (May 8, 1965).

[14] One type of concrete poem overlooked at this stage, as it does not display the combination of classical and contextualising device common to the poems discussed, is the so-called "newspoem" which Morgan developed in 1965, probably shortly after publishing *Starryveldt*, and continued to compose until 1971. Newspoems were created by partially erasing pages of newsprint to reveal "accidental" messages of the type generated by hurriedly mis-scanning headlines: "no juxtaposition or addition allowed", Morgan wrote to Sharkey (August 2, 1965), "only omission … paring away sculpturewise rather than putting together collagewise". Published in an eponymous 1987 edition, they combine the sheer visual presence of juxtaposed fonts and textures evident in the scrapbooks with the general air of anarchic counter-message generated by the dadaish overtones of the collage appearance, and the evidence of one message having been rent from another. This creates a general tension between non-figurative visual device and an impression of the complexity and conflict of communication typical of Morgan's off-concrete. But this tension is not enhanced by significant theme or authorial perspective, largely because, unlike Morgan's "emergents", the newspoems do not invite engagement with the topic suggested by their source-text. Morgan saw them as experiments in misperception rather than frameworks for critique: a 1975 compositional note cites the experiments of the psychologist Frederick Bartlett, who asked groups of participants to copy out misspelt sayings from placards – "all is not gild that glotters", etcetera – finding that most participants inadvertently "corrected" the phrase, although often into a different one. Morgan presents the newspoems as "an attempt to extend these restructuring activities into a more conscious and creative area",

one upshot being that "the original piece of news is deliberately lost": "there is no intention of producing ironies between the conscious and unconscious messages of the newspaper" ("Newspoems" 47-48). Stefan Themerson noted this weakness when rejecting the poems for Gaberbocchus Press, after Morgan had written to him on Sharkey's suggestion. Comparing them to Morgan's "inspired" "Message Clear", which he had read in the *TLS*, Themerson stated "I do not think that your cutouts have the same weight (& clarity & depth)" (August 19, 1966). Indeed, as their publication date reflects, the newspoems' reception was heavily delayed by editorial indifference and ineptitude.

[15] Space constraints prevent discussion of Finlay's own one word poems, which draw metaphorical parallels with wonderful acuity and precision.

[16] These poems are treated as a single sequence ("Nine One Word Poems").

[17] Morgan's desire to avoid gags is suggested by his discarding of an entry included in his archived draft of the poem: "tea time: (i) euphoric dilation of temporal consciousness [of] marijuana smokers (ii) 6 p.m".

[18] Cavan McCarthy had previously had similar problems attempting to letterpress "Like, Little Russian Cat" for his magazine *Tlaloc*, writing on July 3, 1964: "[w]e do not have 28 K's in the whole of our equipment, let alone in a single point size or fount". This re-emphasises the significance of offset lithography to the concrete movement.

[19] These graphics build on those of a sequence of feline poems, some of which, printed in *Starryveldt,* form part of that 1962-63 group, including "Like, Little Russian Cat" and "Chinese Cat". Four more – "French Rocket Cat 1963", "Royal Prerogative Cat", "Gone Cat" and "Scotch Topless Cat" – were composed on July 28, 1964, the first three published as "Three Cats" in *POTH* 12 (1965). These poems are set apart from the rest of that early sequence by tabular, non-figurative visuals. "Like, Little Russian Cat", for example, forces English approximations of the Russian "kak" ("like") and "kotehok" ("kitten") into a narrow, word-bisecting column:

KAKKOTE
HOKKAKK
OTEHOKK….

[20] A version of "Blues and Peal: Concrete 1969" was amongst the British exhibits gathered together by Mayer and Cobbing for the huge exhibition ?Concrete Poetry, held at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, touring legs of which were shown at the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool (October-November 1971) and the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford (February-March 1972). The exhibition's size and diversity reflected both a high-water-mark of "concrete" activity worldwide, and the bursting of the genre's stylistic banks, as the title's prefixed question-mark suggested.

[21] "Warning Poem", composed February 1975, published in 1976, represents a rare return to 1960s techniques, the single repeated line "this poem is going to be cut off by a triangular shark's fin biting into it" eaten away letter by letter then reformed to create a triangular indent bearing out the warning.

[22] The festivals followed the radical takeover of the Poetry Society documented in Peter Barry's *Poetry Wars* (2006). Barry gives an account of the seventh festival, noting that the first six (1968-73) were held in Stockholm, the tenth (1977) in various locations across Europe (42-43).

[23] These colour divisions suggest a separate authorial persona, one of the "second lives" alluded to by the collection's antisyzygy-bothering title, besides the gay identity hinted at by its grammatically un-gendered love poems.

[24] A draft of the unpublished second instalment of Morgan's "spacepoem" series, dated January 6, 1966, is held with his Glasgow University Archives, using the same strung-out text fragments as its predecessor:

> space o o espace o o pass o
> past o silence o o o distance o o
>
> islands moons antlers asteroids stalagmites mastodons
> diamonds glaciers mountains dolmens fogbanks deadseas….("Spacepoem 2")

Words like "espace" suggest the same whimsical interest in the French space programme explored in "French Rocket Cat". A draft of the science fiction poem "In Sobieski's Shield", composed 12-14 September 1964, also contains the prefix "Spacepoem 2".

Apophasis: Dom Sylvester Houédard

Dom Sylvester Houédard OSB, pen name "dsh", produced his first concrete poems early in 1963, including his first "typestracts", precise geometrical constructions exploiting the graphic capabilities of his Olivetti typewriter. These poems were inspired by their classical concrete forebears, and from that time onwards Houédard corresponded with many international concretists, including Gomringer and the Noigandres, incorrigibly propagating his own understanding of concrete style through lectures, essays and letters. It is for this reason that Sharkey's *Mindplay* introduction describes Houédard and Finlay as the UK movement's "two seminal personalities" (14).

However, Houédard's concrete poetry cannot be assessed solely by recourse to classical style. At a formal level, its clearest divergence from that style involved the renunciation of language as a semantic tool: for the first concretists, visual arrangement was a means of enhancing semantic value; for Houédard it often erased it, by transforming graphemes into abstract visual motifs. But this was really a surface-level effect of his work's most recurrent and unusual characteristic: that it reflected an attempt to represent union with God. This imperative connects Houédard's concrete poetry to his vocation as a Benedictine monk, priest and theologian – "OSB" meaning "Order of Saint Benedict", "Dom" an appellation for members of certain religious orders – specifically to his grounding in various traditions of apophatic theology which stressed the need to reject all subjective notions of God's nature to become aware of him, often by abandoning linguistic sense. As Houédard remarked in interview with Colin Wilson, "God is better described as nothing rather than something; indeed if you use the word nothing you already have a concept" ("Discussion" 170).

Framing the primary characteristic of Houédard's concrete poetry thus involves turning to his theological writings, which outline the ideas he inherited from those traditions. These writings reference many spiritual genealogies; the posthumous *Commentaries on Meister Eckhart Sermons* (2000), compiled from lectures presented to the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society in 1990, is an exemplary rather than authoritative account, which draws continuous parallels between the Christian mystic Eckhart (1260-c1327) and other teachers, primarily the Sufi mystic Ibn 'Arabi. The text refers to two paradoxes explored by both thinkers, firstly "the paradox of perpetual creation, that we are continuously receiving being without any interruption, and this being is the self-gift

of God. So we have the paradox as to whether we can say it is God's Being or our being; He gives it to us as ours" (4). The most inward aspect of the human mind, that is, preceding subjective consciousness, is actually a facet of God, separated from his elementary, indivisible state so that he can recognise and celebrate himself: his "self-gift".[1] The inner core of each human mind is thus both human and God: in union with God.[2] Secondly, there is "the paradox of what St. Paul calls epectasy, which is the continuous advance of the mind to God, which goes on through time and through eternity so that we never reach God but we always journey towards him" (4). In other words, the mind in its outer, subjective aspect can never inhabit this inner state of union with God. Instead, it passes out of it in the very act of reflecting upon it, rendering it an other: an object of thought rather than a state of being. This is the moment of cognition, and thus of all communication, including poetry. Houédard often presents this as a problem of temporality, the impenetrability of inner being coextensive with the impenetrability of the present: "the future, as everybody is aware, becomes the present and the very instant that the future becomes the present, the present becomes the past and this point where this arrival and departure of being takes place has no extension at all. So, though we truly receive being which is the self-gift of God, we retain it for zero-time but we do so perpetually" (*Commentaries* 5). The impossibilities, to the subjective mind, of being present and of inhabiting inner mind, are coextensive. The only way for the subjective mind to achieve some intimation of inner mind is to cultivate an awareness of it as an ungraspable other at its root, a state for which Houédard glosses various terms: "[i]n English at least we have the word 'awareness' – St Augustine used the word 'contuition' and Tibetans use the word *rigpa*" (*Commentaries* 5). In a state of awareness, "[t]he mind is perfectly aware that … it cannot be known by any actual act of knowing" (ibid.).

Houédard's concrete poetry transcribes and hones this awareness – that the mind is united with God but that this state is unknowable – making union with God its object while attempting not to show or tell anything about that state, a process referred to here as "negative representation". As Anthony Everitt notes, therefore, Houédard's poems "mark out the limits of that absent Eden from which man supposes he is exiled" (40).

The casting off of language through abstract visual composition was one of two primary means of attempting this: although, as clarified below, that gesture can be more

finely construed in terms of a relativising coexistence of visual and linguistic association. The second reflects the fact that it was hard to create a poem, whether linguistic or visual in effect, that literally referred to nothing. In Houédard's concrete poems, therefore, direct focus is often shifted to something conceptually related to but distinct from the ultimate object of union with God: the process of prayer, thought or ritual through which the subject attempted to access him. Such poems scrupulously avert their gaze from the divine while covertly evoking it by thematic association.

Of course, negative representation is still representation. It does not somehow transcend or invert the normal process of signification, rendering some mystical state of expressionless expression; although Houédard's critical writing does not always acknowledge this. It rather works through the conspicuous absence of part of the content one might expect of the poem, an absence reliant for effect upon simultaneous definition of its object, either through some subtle aspect of the poem's content which is, as it were, positive, or by reader-awareness of that object gleaned from the broader scope of Houédard's work. In this sense, the term "negative" refers to the apophatic principle compelling that work, rather than an actual negation of representation. Neither does the above assessment preclude other influences on Houédard's concrete poetry: beat, cut-up and objectivist poetry, the counter-culture, Wittgenstein and cybernetics; all are discussed below. But these supplementary influences were all ultimately directed towards that primary spiritual imperative.

Houédard's concrete poetry has received relatively little critical attention since the early 1970s. Nicola Simpson's *Notes From the Cosmic Typewriter* (2012) is the first substantial account since Charles Verey's *Dom Sylvester Houédard: Ceolfrith 15* (1972), although the Writers Forum publication *In Memoriam dsh* (1995) contains an eclectic selection of Houédard's work, and Alaric Sumner's *Words Worth* 2.1 contains examples of his translations (1995). Nonetheless, the above summation perhaps counters a largely unwritten consensus regarding Houédard's work: that the subsumption of language by often phantasmagorical visual design bespeaks a slightly questionable aura of oracular insight. Some such attitudes reflect antipathy to the posited shift of UK concrete poetry from the linguistic art typified by Finlay's early-1960s work to a multimedia one, and the sense that that any such multimedia form must be harbouring delusions of transcendental expression. Sharkey's *Mindplay* introduction refutes this misconception by reference to a 1968 article by Mike Weaver:

> Weaver completely misrepresents this poet's work when he refers to the transcendental trap, out of which 'Houédard, mandala-mad, never troubled to climb'. One of the central concerns of Houédard's work has always been to use language as matter rather than means. For him, mysticism has never been a subject to write a poem on. (18)

In interview with Wilson, though not rejecting the term "mysticism", Houédard denied that the apophatic principles underpinning his work credited states of transcendent cognition: "the real culprit was the conception, which is still popular, of mysticism as exalted states, bi-location, levitation, all the *sidhis* that make 'mysticism' something exceptional, something rare" (170). This chapter, in emphasising negative rather than transcendent communication, partly addresses the same misconception.

The following sections track the development of Houédard's negative representation, which found consummate expression in his typestracts, over 1950-75, while acknowledging aspects of his poetry and poetics which override that principle. I initially assess his 1950s and early-1960s poetry, considering the apophatic tendencies in his unpublished 1963 collection *Jeux Théologiques* in the context of beat poetry and Catholic mysticist writing, and his brief exploration of negative representation through an "afterbeat" form developed around 1962. His enthusiastic engagement with international concrete poetry is associated with his sense of its capacity to transfigure other literary styles – beat and objectivist poetry; Dadaism and existentialism – and its affinity with cybernetics and Wittgenstein's linguistic theory, as well as its most significant ability: to transcribe "awareness" through negative representation. However, I also acknowledge a transcendentalist colouring to Houédard's poetics at this time. These factors underpin a reading of his first concrete collection *Kinkon* (1965), which tends towards kinetic form, and seems compelled both by a sense of the transcendent capacities of visual poesis, and a Wittgensteinian interest in language-game creation, besides principles of negative representation. His mid-1960s poetry is assessed in the alternative context of the 1960s counter-culture, specifically Houédard's association of concrete's intermedial forms with models of non-authoritarian society, framed by the culture of ecumenism within the Catholic Church during the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Turning to the typestracts – *A Book of Chakras* (1967), *Tantric Poems Perhaps* (1967) and *Like Contemplation* (1972) – I consider the representation of Tantric ritual

through visual linguistic construction to exemplify both the primary principles of negative representation identified above. Finally, I assess the broader notion of a splitting or slippage of meaning in his 1960s-70s transparent and reversible poems, focusing on the 1975 collection *Begin Again*. For reasons of space, Houédard's translations and event scores, arguably both related to concrete poetry, are not discussed.[3]

## *Jeux Théologiques* and Afterbeat: 1950-63

Houédard attended Jesus College Oxford from 1942-49, postponing his studies to work for military intelligence in Asia from 1944-47. In 1949 he joined Prinknash Abbey in Gloucestershire as a novice monk, taking his vows in 1951 before spending the next three years undertaking a licentiate degree at St. Anselmo Benedictine College in Rome, completing a thesis on "liberty in Sartre" (Houédard "Chronobiography/ Autozoography" 26). Returning to Prinknash he became a priest in 1959, remaining at the abbey until his death. At Oxford, Houédard stated, he wrote "poems aiming at newform[:] pierronades-pierranelles mostly French"; a native of Guernsey, he was bilingual ("Chronobiography/Autozoography" 26). His 1950s poetry he called "metaphysical. beat. apophatic", noting Ginsberg's influence from 1951 "thru usa Benedictines" ("Dom Pierre Sylvester Houédard" 51). Poems from 1948-63 were compiled in *Jeux Théologiques*, an unpublished collection which Houédard described as "leading from opposition to accepted images to opposition to all images: later characterised as 'neometaphysical' by peterfison & 'beat' by georgemacbeth" ("Chronobiography/Autozoography" 26). A fragmented typescript is stored with Houédard's Manchester papers – the version referenced here – and one or two constituent poems were published, notably in *In Memorium dsh* (1995) and Hayden Murphy's *Broadsheet* 21 (1974; "Creation" and "Memra").

These poems prefigure Houédard's concrete poetry in two ways. Firstly, many adopt comically outlandish metaphors for union with God – their sole theme – reflecting an "opposition to accepted images" prefiguring negative representation. These metaphors could be viewed in the context of surrealist poetry, as Everitt asserts (38), or of the metaphysical conceit, a connection suggested by Houédard and Fison's use of the term "metaphysical", and by Houédard's enthusiasm for George Herbert, noted by

Hayden Murphy (personal interview). But they are most illuminatingly viewed as reworked motifs from Catholic mysticist poetry, tempered by the informal grammar and lineation of beat literature. Secondly, many poems in the sequence, while continuing to evoke that union directly, use authorial self-distancing devices which simultaneously imply the impossibility of its expression, a movement towards "opposition to all images" which beckons negative representation.

A 1950 poem, "The God Pie", exemplifies the former trait:[4]

> in the oven of the spirit
> my soul is cooking the blessed trinity in a pie
> eager to tell if it is getting brown
> or even done
> it yet refrains itself from peeping
> for
> to open the door of that dark oven
> would be to let in cooling air
> and light
> and draughts that might blow out the flame of love….

The titular metaphor presents triune God and inner mind united like pie in oven. A bawdy allusion to pregnancy – having "one in the oven" – mimics the associations of insemination which characterise descriptions of union with God in, for example, St. John of the Cross's "Songs of the Soul in Intimate Communication and Union with the Love of God", as translated by Roy Campbell:

> Oh flame of love so living,
> How tenderly you force
> To my soul's inmost core your fiery probe!....

Houédard thus idiosyncratically reframes the mysticist evocation of that union as romantic liaison, as if to freshen conception of it, even if his metaphor's evident absurdity suggests a whimsical authorial detachment. But the terms of that metaphor already indicate Houédard's sense of the impossibility of its direct evocation: whereas St. John describes the moment of union or insemination itself, Houédard hints at it in retrospect, as well as envisaging a future reunion, in God's imagined voice:

& having heard my word
yr self is lost
in the endless sea of now
& only on the last day
will you even have a body to be drowned in it….

The projection of these images into past and future bespeaks Houédard's concern with the impossibility of direct immersion in the "endless sea of now" which true congress with God would comprise.

In this sense the poem predicates later pieces from the sequence characterised by an ironic self-distancing from positive accounts of union with God, through a shift from idiosyncrasy to bald inappropriateness of the metaphors and modes of address used to depict it. "Intrinsic Spiral" (ca.1962-3) renders God and supplicant zoo animal and spectator, reducing God to a bestial state:

the thing we liked best i think
was seeing the cage where theyve got god
& feeding it with buns
……...
its not very big
rather small actually
makes you rather want to cuddle it
but the keeper
says it gets quite savage at times

Others comprise sardonically disingenuous-seeming second person addresses. "Mattins: Or the Prayer of Desire" (1962) likens monastic morning prayer to physical assault:

this time god
youd better look out
im after you for good now
youve got away with it before
when i was a bit soft on you
but ive found out where you go to
so it isn't any use hiding
…….
my god
when i lay my hands on you
christ
i don't know what the hell'll happen
but you wont forget it in a hurry

Houédard's ironic blaspheming encapsulates the implied alienation of God and supplicant in these later poems: a kind of cathartic self-mockery disavowing any positive account of God's nature; such poems seem to clear a space for negative representation without discovering it.

By around 1962, however Houédard seemed to feel he had harnessed that quality, in a grammatically condensed poetry arranged in perpendicular strings of minute lines, which was "not just increasingly shorter but increasingly self-referent" ("Note by dsh 720510"). Withdrawing from direct expression of their object, these poems focus on the process of prayer through which access to God is attempted, thereby negatively framing that state itself. Their peculiar visual forms also sap attention from language's "positive" capacities, indicating an object beyond the reach of representation in a similar manner to his concrete work. In fact, both the qualities just defined are central to Houédard's concrete poetry; given that these poems were composed after his discovery of it, we might thus read them as exploratory forays into the style. However, their linear grammar sets them apart from Houédard's own concrete work, suggesting that they precede that development. Supplementary stylistic qualities – informal grammar and punctuation, short overall length and small, meandering lines, cumulatively cultivating a sense of brevity and lightness – reflect the influence of contemporary, beat-inspired UK-based poets such as Hollo. Houédard discussed these poets' work in the *Aylesford Review* article "Beat and Afterbeat: A Parallel Condition of Poetry and Theology?" (1963), coining the term "afterbeat" to describe it. That term is appropriated here to describe Houédard's own poetry of the period; the article forms the basis of a discussion of those poets' influence, preceding assessment of some exemplary "afterbeat" poems.

As its subtitle implies, the article is centrally concerned with the relationship between poetry and spiritual vision, crediting beat poetry with the capacity to transcribe a particular kind of religious insight. The first section posits a model for such awareness – In breathless, Kerouac-style prose, via a dizzying range of interfaith references – based on the analogy of the "ma'at merkavah (cart carriage vehicle: cf hina-mayahana)", a carriage able to transport its inhabitants between earthly and divine realms (142). The motif has an interfaith pedigree apposite to Houédard's ecumenism, exemplified by his citation of a Sanskrit Buddhist equivalent, "mayahana", for the Hebraic "merkavah" – elsewhere "merkabah" – itself prefixed with an ancient Egyptian term for truth, "ma'at"

(ibid.). It is also pleasingly allusive of road novels, but its chief value lies in balancing the imperatives of inward contemplation and outward communication: "[t]he merkabah—Yahwehs hot rod & cool cool chariot beefed stripped glossed & tanned to touch the sun is a 2-way symbol: of beat escape from the semi-pureness of our times to the transcendence of god & life in the otherworld KINGDOM of the regnum dei: symbol too of the afterbeat presence of elohim with us in this alive life" (ibid.). The merkabah travels both into God's kingdom and back from it, analogising both beatific – and beat – vision, and the translation of that experience back into subjective thought: for "us in this alive life". The essay's second section outlines the different ways in which Kerouac, Burroughs, Ginsberg, Orlovsky and Corso are able to achieve this "there & back" movement (143): largely, Houédard implies, through a pace and energy of composition associable with sentence length and truncated grammar which strains language's positive capacities, indicating a radiant space beyond it, as in Kerouac's "long long sentences switching off to jewel centre" (144).[5] The effect is like negative representation – indicating an object while withholding direct expression of it – but the power granted to the beat poet to directly experience some congress with God counteracts that concept's underpinning principle of "awareness".

But beat poetry needed to develop, Houédard continues, to keep indicating those radiant spaces, as its earnest energy was by now indicative of an assimilated cultural trope: "the unexpected, the syncopated, the mad" (143). The "afterbeat" poetry which Houédard sought would nuance the pace and energy of beat, reframing that space through a lightness rather than exhaustion of linguistic expression. The essay's third section tests various contemporary poetic genres for evidence of this quality, including what Houédard calls "EYEVERSE", a category incorporating concrete (148-49). But his beacon of afterbeat style at this time is the contemporaneous strain of UK-based, beat-inflected poetry captured in Hollo's 1963 anthology *Jazz Poems*. These poems, Houédard asserts, "are not HITTING the reader with messages … are on the way to equalising reader/author: giving the reader not the cage with a dead poem in it but … the shared experience of CREATING the poem" (153).

It is unclear what stylistic devices Houédard saw as rendering this quality, construed here in terms of a space left by the author's expression which allows the reader to help "create the poem". But his contemporaneous work suggests a response to the brevity of statement and trickling lineation of poems like Hollo's "A Greeting to

Friends" – arguably too indebted to Creeley to indicate a totally new style – printed in the same *Aylesford Review* as "Beat and Afterbeat":

> This is about you
> friends
> who people that city,
> move
> in its shelters
> & tunnels,
> Streets…. (130)

These traits generate a cooler implied tone than much beat poetry – but for which beat's grammatical informality is co-opted – suggesting that much has been left unsaid, an implication which could clearly complement poems turned to the imperative of negative representation. The striking lineation, which for Hollo perhaps indicated a reading rhythm befitting jazz accompaniment, might also have influenced the visual forms of Houédard's poetry.

The light touch of afterbeat style plays into various unpublished poems from 1962-63 stored with Houédard's papers, whose primary characteristics are a focus on prayer rather than union with God, and a strange perpendicular lineation also reminiscent of Robert Lax's 1950s verse, drawing attention from the linguistic to the visual:

> every image
> of god
> i see
> is me
> & most
> of all
> the one
> of him
> as nothing
>
> eaten by a
> nothing image
> in my mind
> i'm endlessly
> inside
> my endless
> inside
> me

These two poems, composed April 17, 1963, evoke epectasy: the endless approach of the mind towards God, and its passage out of him at the moment of cognition, each thought of him becoming an "image of me".[6] However, through expression of that process, the poems' ultimate object is gestured towards as an unspeakable absence. To similar ends, the vertical visuals draw attention away from language towards an agglomeration of nonfigurative marks or strokes, avowing some alternative, nonrepresentational value. That inference might seem spurious, but becomes convincing when the visual development is tracked forward to more exaggerated examples such as "Poetrypoem for a Reverend Mother" (1966):

i
sed
to
god
is
it
u
u
or
?u
he
sed
no
i sed
hic
cup
ing
i'm
so
sorry

Or the *Kinkon* poem "Dialogue" (fig. 1), in which the visual value of verticals is confirmed by complementary horizontals. Afterbeat qualities complement these characteristics: the restless onward movement suggested by the tiny lines, as if they were increments of time's passage, and to remain on one too long would be to stick in the past; the poems' brevity of statement, and diminutive overall length. Such effects suggest an attempt at the lightest possible mediation of the poem's object in the style attributed to Hollo et al.

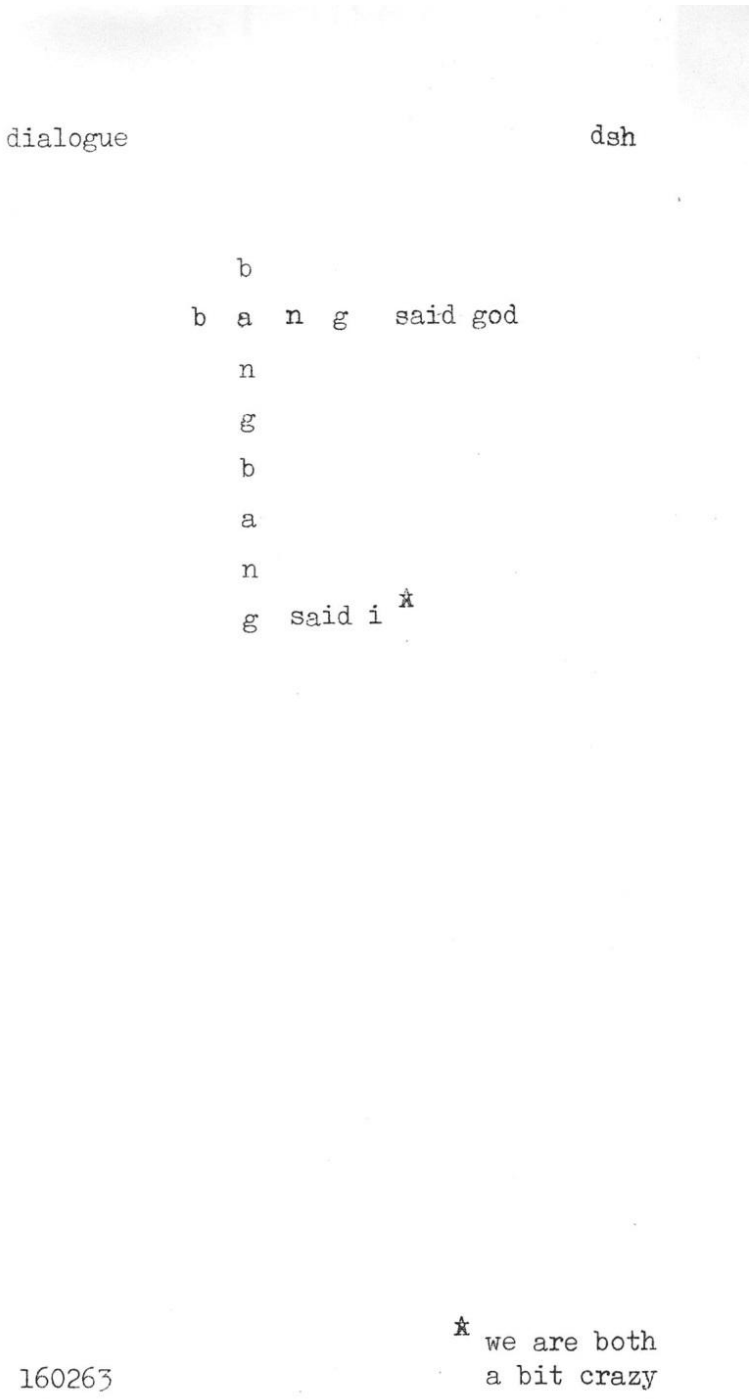



Fig. 1. “Dialogue”.

In deferring direct expression of their object, turning instead to the thought process used to access it, and their germinal visual significance, these poems undoubtedly presage Houédard's concrete poetry. But a contemporaneous piece – composed April 27, 1963 – hints at a yearning for a further inward turn in the apophatic path: the jettisoning of language altogether:

today i feel
i must make an apology
for the language
ive been using
in poetry
you see
its the only language
poets have
inherited
but we're hoping
by tomorrow
we may have something
more computerised
a bit less insulting
to electronics
humans &&c

Concrete Poetry

If the style which Houédard discovered through Melo e Castro's letter in May 1962 represented a solution to this dilemma, a year nonetheless passed before his first creative responses to it, and his first communications with the concrete movement. The latter seemingly began in late spring 1963. A letter from Gomringer stored with Houédard's papers, sent on July 5, almost certainly from that year, contains Gomringer's response to an introductory missive: "dear mr osb….i never expected any interest in kp from england". Houédard began corresponding with the De Camposes around the same time – the earliest of their archived letters to him is dated July 26, 1963 – and with UK poets such as Finlay slightly earlier (see chapter 3). Houédard began gathering West Country contacts around the same time. At some point in 1963-64 he attended an exhibition of John Furnival's text art in the gallery space attached to Gloucester College of Art, arranging a meeting at which he introduced Furnival to concrete poetry, and out of which was born their press Openings (Furnival, personal interview).[7] Houédard also

met the Bristol based writer John Sharkey during this period, regularly leaving Prinknash to meet him under the auspices of visiting a jewel thief friend in Bristol jail (Sharkey, personal interview). Other contacts subsequently accrued include Kenelm Cox, whom Houédard met in 1964 through Furnival, Cox's colleague at Stroud College of Art (Furnival, letter to the author, January 24, 2011), and Charles Verey, who may have met Houédard through the Catholic Church. Thomas A. Clark seemingly joined the group slightly later, recounting in his foreword to a Ken Cox memorial publication that his "first visits to Gloucestershire were in the mid-sixties".

The development of Houédard's own concrete poetry is difficult to date, partly because early pieces were often privately circulated with letters, but it probably began slightly before this accrual of correspondents. An unpublished, archived poem, "Can Yr Typewriter Waggle its Ears" (April 1, 1963), clearly dates from the time when the underpinning ideas were in ferment:

> my t'writer
> s got real inside
> interiority
> it types the logos into smudges
> thru ribbon images
> with a feeling of assurance
> writes innerness poetry
> with a note of authority
> performs poetrygraphs
> & eyepoems
> with absolute unrepeatability
> its junkey prayerlife
> is the total silence
> of a contemplative
> nothing construction
> shooting out the din
> of its soul at work
> if you look inside
> its minds like the machineage
> in a microscope
> its musics concrete
> new wave jazz
> & pantonality….

In a similar vein, "Beat and Afterbeat", published that summer, refers to "my typoems and wordsmudges" as examples of "EYEVERSE" (149). *Kinkon* (June 1965) contains

proto-concrete work from February 1963, and early kinetic concrete poems from that June. His earliest published work definable as concrete might have been the single poem publication *Yes-No*, another piece formed from intersecting vertical and horizontal lines, composed September 9, 1963 and published that year according to the chronology in *Dom Sylvester Houédard: Ceolfrith 15* ("Publications" 22).[8] His first two published typestracts probably appeared in the *ICA Bulletin* 135 (May 1964). One of these, dated "020663", seems to be the earliest published by composition date: a set of concentric rectangular frames formed from the letter *t* in various states of overprinting, from which single imprints break off and diffuse across the white space below.[9]

Concrete poetry was attractive to Houédard for various reasons, all tributary to its capacity to express "prayerlife". Below, I assess his conception of negative representation in concrete as a synthesis of the qualities of beat and objectivist poetry, specifically in the autumn 1964 article "To Freshen Our Sense of the Language We Do Have", which endows it with the transcendent capacities previously ascribed to beat. By contrast, I also consider his quantification, in various contemporaneous writings, of negative representation as a means of playfully emphasising the impossibility of such transcendent expression, and thus as a palliative to the yearning for such expression in Dadaism and existentialism. I then assess how this sense of negative representation was complemented by Houédard's association of concrete composition with cybernetic and mechanical process, and its partial development as a theistic response to Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. Finally, I consider the historical tradition of concrete composition which Houédard identified to support his idea of it as the expression of an immemorial spiritual capacity, and in this context consider antecedents for his own concrete from the Middle Ages and twentieth century.

"To Freshen Our Sense of the Language", another *Aylesford Review* contribution, presents concrete poetry as an advance on two previous genres: "3 things in postwar poetry—the *beats/redcats* (ginsberg-corso-yevtushenko-vossnesensky—the *newpoetry* of olson zukofsky creely & the cidevant-blackmountaineers—la *nouvelle poésie* of gomringer-rot-kp-noigandres of ianhamiltonfinlay & maxbense of henrichopin Bernard heidsieck bryongysin" (154). Houédard's "nouvelle poésie" category, which includes Brion Gysin and the French sound poets, is refined to "concrete" in a later passage, which also sheds the Russian "redcats", and defines a process of expressive refinement across the genres in terms of increasing "expression of ch'i rather than self" (ibid.): "up thru the *purgativa*

*via* of beat—*illuminativa* of the new—to the *unitiva* of concrete where 'the syllable turns solid' (zukofsky in letter) & the poem communicates not some tertium quid but its own self poemly" (ibid.). "Ch'i", a Taoist term meaning inner breath or energy allusive of Olson's poetics of breath, indicates a cognitive essence other than subjectivity which I take as similar to Houédard's notion of inner mind. The developmental stages – "via purgativa", "via illuminativa" and "via unitiva" – are presented in terms of "theosis", the tripartite process of development into God's likeness posited by John of the Cross. The "via purgativa" involves a purgation of selfish desires, the "via illuminative" an illuminating awareness of God, and the "unitiva" a resulting state of unity, which Houédard implies to be uniquely expressible through concrete poetry; the grounds of these terms' application are worth exploring.

Houédard's sense of a purgative early-1960s turn in beat poetry was perhaps intuited from a letter of Allen Ginsberg's published as a "Prose Contribution to Cuban Revolution" (1962), in which he described a tortured realisation, compelled by engagement with Burroughs's cut-ups, that language must be abandoned as a medium of self-expression in order to further poetry's expressive capacities: "further awareness meant dropping every fixed concept of self, identity, role, ideal, habit & pleasure. It meant dropping language itself, *words*, as medium of consciousness" (68). Houédard frequently cited this letter as comparable in its influence upon him to Melo e Castro's, perhaps taking Ginsberg's renunciation of self-expression as evidence of the turn from egotistical desire comprising the via purgativa.[10] The application of the following two terms to objectivism and concrete is contextualised by the article itself, via the Olson quote which is also the source of its title:

> like olsons letter says—a word needs our interference, like we need to know its resistances before we *possess* (are host to) the meaning given in its 'use'—so the poet interferes w/ language, explores and freshens its resistances—'language itself is VIEW'—communication is ie not like leper-squint just some peephole to view thru (=new) – then ?one step forward ? to side? (or leap) & language communication as VIEWED (nouvelle & concrete). (155)

Houédard probably interpreted this proposed "freshening of language's resistances" as an emphasis of its non-identity with its object, a constriction of its positive aspects: like drawing the eye away from a peephole to make both view and viewing point visible. Concrete poetry, by this account, further magnifies language's negative aspects, such

that it refers to nothing beyond itself, as if only the viewing point were visible: "language as VIEWED". The two stages can be connected to theosis as emblems of an increasing awareness of inner mind and God's presence within it, coextensive with an increasing sense of the impossibility of its expression, reflected in a poetry without referents. Houédard's description of this process in terms of altered *vision* contextualises his turn to concrete to render that effect.

Clearly, this formulation of concrete style bears a transcendentalist streak. Houédard's evocation of poetry "communicating its own self poemly" implies that the concrete poem could somehow become both medium and object, achieving through the very renunciation of positive expression some intimation of that object exceeding signification: present or become it. This might have been rooted in a sense of the capacity of visual gesture for such presentation, linked to the formulation of enlightenment as visual illumination common in Christian and Platonist theology: Murphy states that Houédard's ideas "were always led by image" (personal interview). His article associates this quality with a poetry of "minute quiet balanced exquisite clear" form (155), suggesting a debt to the linguistic distillation and iconic visuality of Gomringer's 1950s poetry and Finlay's standing poems, one of which Houédard calls "a european landmark" (156). Some *Kinkon* poems, discussed in this context below, bear such traces.

Other sources, however, suggest that Houédard's turn to concrete coolly resisted such transcendental yearning. Various articles, including "Concrete Poetry and Ian Hamilton Finlay" and "Paradada", formulate it as a corrective to precisely that yearning in modern art, involving a form of negative representation achieved through the combination of language and image. The former describes "2 tendencies in modern art since Napoleon III's Salon des Refusés 1863", firstly "the largely pre-WW/1 move to the authentic & non-mimetic, a move powered by its own built-in nuclear proton-neutron drive" (47). Houédard subdivides this group into "CONSTRICTIVE CONTRACTIVE" and "CONSTRUCTIVE" categories, the former including "the necessary negative anti-past (but still creative) épurations of eg the Dadaists & surrealism", the "CONSTRUCTIVE" incorporating "affirmative pro-future creativeness on each side of the emotional/cerebral (heart/mind or expressionist/cubist &c/&c) split", including constructivism itself (ibid.). This is contrasted with a second tendency, "the largely post-WW/2 overspill to coexistentialism & mutual

interpenetration, rejection of divides & borders, delight in accepting ambiguity/ambivalence: alive blurring of frontiers between art & art, mind & mind, world & world, mind art & world. ... SPATIAL **COEXISTENTIAL**" (ibid). The overall distinction is not the constructivist-dadaist split telescoped into debates between proponents of so-called clean and dirty concrete: Houédard's first subdivision is closer to that. It rather distinguishes the "largely pre-WW/1" yearning for "the authentic & non-mimetic" – an urge to transcend mediation, either by collapsing existing expressive systems or by constructing new ones – from the "largely post-WW/2 overspill to "coexistentialism": a combination of many representative systems denoting a refusal to reify or reject any, a playful acceptance of their equal mediate-ness. In his lecture "Eyear", the first on concrete poetry delivered in the UK – presented in two parts at the Royal College of Art and ICA on March 2 and May 12, 1964 – Houédard described the primary characteristic of post-1945 art as a "sense of zen-peace found in accepting things for the sake of their hollowness". "Concrete Poetry and Ian Hamilton Finlay" associates concrete poetry primarily with coexistentialism, glossing it under the consecutive headings "constricting" and "constructive" before alighting on that term as if in conclusive definition. "Paradada", another term for concrete, similarly denotes this evasion of the early-twentieth-century yearning towards the non-mimetic: "un-un & cool nothing paradada (surdada) outgrowing sticky fears of inner neant" ("Paradada").

The word "coexistentialism" can also be contextualized in other ways. Houédard's early-1960s engagement with McLuhan, for example, suggests a connection to the prologue of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), in which McLuhan calls for the modern mind to develop the ability to translate information between different cognitive modes – specifically the visual mode of print culture and the oral mode of the electronic age – developing a sense of "interplay and ratio that makes *rational* co-existence possible" (5). Co-existentialism is also clearly a punning corrective to the tortured formulations of meaninglessness in French existentialism; Houédard had studied Sartre in the 1950s, of course. A 1987 essay on Beckett, audaciously appropriating him for the same cause, states that "Beckett's non-pessimism (say non-non-optimism for greater precision) has here a *place* and *function*, eliminative of what I called in my fifties thesis on *Sartre & Nothingness* the failure of Sartre to (not *revel* in but) feel at home with this Néant *in* which (and *that*) we are" (" 'What's a Door Doing Here?' A Squint at Beckett's Layered Question" 53).

The posited shift is from dread at the hollowness of signs, and thus of the selves which signs shape, rooted in a sense of some absent alternative, to a whimsical acceptance of that state as without alternative. "Beat and Afterbeat" refers to "pass[ing] the naive existentialist hope for a temporary reconciliation with life & coincidence in being" (153), a remark evoking Morgan's description of concrete poetry in *Peace News* as "post-existentialist" ("Concrete Poetry" 7); or Finlay's evocation of "The character in Kafka who says, 'How like Kafka' and goes off whistling cheerfully" (*Domestic Pensées* 23). Importantly though, Houédard's acceptance of the hollowness of signs related not so much to their value per se, as to their inadequateness to express his poetry's particular, divine object.

By this account, concrete poetry entailed a mixture of representative systems, primarily language and image, which expressed their mutual containment in the web of representation: their non-transcendence. This confirms the centrality of negative representation to Houédard's own poetics, but nuances the idea that it involved replacing language with image. By this account it is equally reliant on the interpreter's acknowledgement that the poem contains language-forms – the graphemes and diacritics used to build up the image – even if they are illegible. In this sense, the mystical power ascribed to concrete as a visual poesis, and perhaps to vision generally, in "To Freshen Our Sense of the Language" is undermined: image and language become two equally earth-bound representative registers.

Houédard's description of his typewriter's insides – "like the machineage/ in a microscope" – reflects a complementary sense of the affinity between concrete composition and cybernetic or mechanical process. For Houédard, emphasising this affinity indicated a coexistentialist ease with the mediate nature of representation, by suggesting its contingency to enabling mechanisms: not necessarily machines in the conventional sense, but thought and language themselves. In the second part of "Eyear" he noted:

> w/ development of our electronic pseudo-egos – analog/digital computers – poetry has become I-less … the conscious but terrified recognition of this dichotomy of human/dehuman was what characterised surrealism & existentialism – & now the conscious but complacent delighted thankful joyful recognition of this schizoid basis in the condition humaine is the central unifying key to current art.

Houédard's proclivity for the typewriter reflected his sense that its mechanical constraints of form – the latent grid it imposed on the page, its limitations of font and colour-range – emblematised the broader constraining mechanisms of human sense and behaviour, on which he ruminated in a letter to Morgan (July 26, 1964):

> like I/ME JE/MOI the machines part of me – i'm part of it
> we work together ...
> us & machines
> well tongues ears feet hands hearts (cunts & pricks too) emotions
> & all that
> as well as artificial hands feet teeth eyes? hair???
> hearing aids walkingsticks
> pens brushes t-writers &&&c up to ibm computers …

Concrete's relationship to mechanical process was obvious from Melo e Castro's letter, itself a response to Willetts's "Poetry, Prose and the Machine", which had speculated on the future of writing in "literature's machine age". But Houédard's sense of that relationship must be distinguished from that of the early concretists.

Willetts's article relevantly distinguishes between two connotations of language's mechanical treatment. One involves the trans-subjective rationalisation of subjective sense, in the manner of the self-correcting cybernetic feedback systems identified in Wiener's *Cybernetics* (1948). Willetts postulates various "condensed, non-linear" methods for arranging existing writing, involving mechanical information storage methods – magnetic tape, microfiche – by which it could be condensed and synthesised:

> [S]cholarly books of real value will be theoretically producible without the author writing a single word. Libraries and archives will give him all the material which he has selected in such a form—microphotographs or tape, for instance—that it can be printed without any kind of manual transcription. He may cut it like a film or compose it like a picture.

Melo e Castro's letter, describing concrete poetry as "a successful experiment in ideogrammatic or diagrammatic writing", responded to this vision of mechanical text as a self-correcting entity, as did the Noigandres' "Pilot Plan": "[c]hronomicro-metering of hazard. Control. Cybernetics. The poem as a mechanism regulating itself: feed-back. Faster communication (problems of functionality and structure implied) endows the poem with a positive value and guides its own making" (72). By contrast, the start of

Willetts's article refers to the use of mechanical composition to "eliminate sense", by depersonalising the composition process. It references Ballestrini, and the "stochastic texts" produced by Bense at the Stuttgart Technische Hochschule, published in *Bestandteile des Vorüber* ("Components of the Past"; 1961). Both involved mechanically shuffling pre-existing chunks of language to produce something akin to cut-up poetry.

To Willetts, such "abstract" works ran "directly contrary to the main trend of mechanisation and rationalisation": "to make meanings more quickly accessible". But it is the capacity of mechanical process to trouble or abstract sense to which Houédard's concrete poetics responded. This perhaps reflects the fact that he came to the idea not only through classical concrete, but through Burroughs's cut-ups, which he took to have eliminated subjective sense by abdicating composition to a predetermining mechanism, getting poetry "beyond language" as self-expression ("EX/CON/CRETE"). For Houédard, the mechanical or pseudo-mechanical aspect of concrete poetry could thus undermine sense as well as clarify it, its "mechanical" overtones partly evident, therefore, simply in its evacuation of semantic meaning. Composition as mechanical process is more specifically evoked by the typestracts' exploitation and emphasis of the geometrical limits of their form, and by some *Kinkon* kinetic poems, whose implied temporal rhythms and incremental visual developments evoke the logic of the cybernetic circuit, turned to the inverse end of negating meaning. The ultimate goal of all such effects was to emphasise the mechanical, mediatory nature of the composing subject's thought, and thus its incapacity to access its divine object.

If negative representation was the concept through which Houédard embraced concrete, a key influence on its development was Wittgenstein, to whom Houédard's 1965 poem booklet *Vienna Circles* is partly dedicated, and whose work, Murphy notes, he read "again and again and again" (personal interview).[11] Wittgenstein's influence compelled both Houédard's turn to negative representation, and his sense that by the terms of Wittgenstein's later theory, the concrete poet could become a creator rather than user of language; the latter influence is discussed in relation to the phonetic permutational poems in *Kinkon*.

Clarifying the first influence involves returning to the central thesis of *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). Simply speaking, that text had recanted the central notion of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921): that there was an essential structure to linguistic propositions from which the essential structure of "the world", reality, could

be deduced. Language was re-envisaged as a "spatial and temporal phenomenon" (47), a series of instances or examples structurally determined by their use in constructing an impression of a particular thing, lacking any common essence. Moreover, because the supposition of an essential structure to language was the basis of the inferred essence of the world, that world, reality, vanished: at least as a series of fixed essences. Reality rather *became* the meshwork of impressions that thought, given usable shape by language, comprised: "[w]hat looks as if it *had* to exist, is part of the language. It is a paradigm in our language-game" (25). In conceiving of a common inner mind shared with God, Houédard was clearly positing an essential reality of the kind which this theory challenged. His burgeoning sense, over the 1950s-early 1960s, of language's incapacity to express that state, culminating in the negative poetics of concrete, can thus partly be considered a theistic response to this challenge. Houédard accepted, that is, that subjective linguistic thought, and the subjective reality that it held in place, bore no essential aspect, thus no possible connection to a world beyond: in "Paradada", he asserted that concrete poetry, "logically postwittgenstein", "treats language as matter". But this essential reality, rather than vanishing, appears in Houédard's concrete poetry to have been shifted to a space inaccessible to subjective thought, gestured towards by gaps, framed absences, in a poem's representational remit: the premise of negative representation.

Despite the posited unknowability of inner mind, Houédard's sense of it as a universal human essence made awareness of it a necessarily immemorial facet of human thought. As Houédard saw concrete poetry as the unique means of expressing that awareness, he was thus highly concerned with asserting the style's historical roots. A retrospective piece in *Stereo Headphones* (1970) recalls his delight at "the gradual awareness of how much pregomringer there was" ("EX/CON/CRETE"); "Concrete Poetry and Ian Hamilton Finlay" refers to various concrete precursors: "amulets talismans grigris mani-walls deviltraps…." (47). But that history was most exhaustively posited in "Between Poetry and Painting: Chronology" (1965) the supplementary chronology which he produced for the *Between Poetry and Painting* exhibition catalogue.

Houédard's sense of such a history is more important to establish than his evidence for it, but some examples might enhance our appreciation of it. Subdivided into three sections, this article's subheadings widen Houédard's remit by substituting "poetry" with the words "writing" or "logos". Variously renamed, these sections could

essentially be called "painting becoming writing", "painting and writing tending to equal terms" and "writing becoming painting". Each covers a different set of possibilities of visualised language, the first and third not necessarily indicative of a negative representative tendency. It is the second sub-chronology which comes to stand for that mutually negative coexistence of vision and language, and which Houédard was thus probably keenest to stress.

The first concerns visual art-forms appropriating linguistic functions. One typically audacious chronological sweep connects the mnemonics and pictographs preceding rebus-based writing – "knotches, knots, quipus and wampam etc – pictographs ideographs, hieroglyphs" – to the pictorial "writing" of early-twentieth-century painting. "the progressive interiorisation of both object and act of painting", Houédard asserts, turned "expressionist paintings into a gestural writing", while "abstract/concrete painting" expanded painting into "non-referent words" (2).

The third concerns writing assuming the qualities of visual art, subdivided into "pre-figurative", "figurative" and "non-figurative" (7-9). The first subcategory partly distinguishes the visuality intrinsic to all writing, emphasised in "large texts and the mixing of texts and pictures", as in "the mortuary temple of Ramses III" (7-8). It also covers texts in which typographic visual diversions reveal alternative written messages: "the earliest acrostic", "from Shaggil-Kinam-Ubbib's Babylonian theodicy 1500-1000 bc"; "acronyms or notarika – eg 250 bc Maccabees banner Mi Camonah BAalim"; palindromic texts like the Roman "ROTAS/SATOR square", and messages "counterpointed in visual pattern across normal text grid", as in medieval "carmina cancellata" (8). The "figurative" section glosses the history of pattern poetry, from Greek technopaegnia – Simmias of Rhodes and others – to works from the European Renaissance – Rabelais's bottles and barrels, Herbert's "Easter Wings" – through to Carroll's mouse tail, Apollinaire's calligrammes, Dylan Thomas's "lozenges and hatchets" and "Furnival's towers and bridges" (9). The extensive "non-figurative" section covers text "arranged in abstract designs", or "spatially placed so that by the eye being directed in significant patterns the mind relates and groups the letters/words/texts" (9-10). This subsection is most relatable to the transcendent power granted to visible language in Houédard's theosis-based theory of concrete, asserting concrete's "prehistory in magic" as a "substitute for ikons if worshipping carved images are forbidden" (10).[12] Houédard cites Roman pattern-poem amulets for warding off evil,

like the "abracadabra" pendant, "Babylonian devil traps", and the "concrete" syntax of sixteenth-century Kabbalic texts, arranged in "spokes rays spirals etc", concluding with a vast twentieth-century genealogy only latterly incorporating concrete (ibid.).

Houédard's second and most vital category is also divided into three sections: "painting incorporates writing", "painting of the word or near word", and "ikon and logos on equal terms" (2-5). The first connects "transitional" writing systems combining pictorial and phonetic signs – "Babylonian, Egyptian, Hittite; Chinese, Maya, Aztec" (2) – and the oriental tradition of adding calligraphs to paintings, to the use of text in cubist painting, Klee's pseudo-orthographic "tableaux-poèmes", and Dada collage. The second subcategory, "where painter doesn't merely introduce a word but creates a painting of the word of near word", involves bringing the symbolic associations of the image to the written sign itself. Passing through Kandinksky and sign-writing, Houédard connects the near-word painting of Japanese Zen circles with the writerly symbols of abstract expressionism. Notably, he distinguishes Pollock's "zen sickness in attempt to realise the existential self" through painted language from "the nothingmind or no-self that Metzger discovered 1959-61 with his invisible Pollock-writing in acid" (4). This distinction presages the shift into the final category, in which image and language are spliced not in yearning for some transcendent, syncretic register, but to coolly emphasise the impossibility of such expression, using that coexistence to indicate their mutual relativity. Houédard ascribes this capacity not just to auto-destruction but also to concrete poetry, specifically the Noigandres' wordless semiotic poetry, and the Gloucester group's "machine poems", describing the latter as "an abstract nonsemantic/nonfigurative semiotic poetry which will become the exact centre where ikon and logos identify" (7). As well as assigning concrete poetry a vast, unwieldy prehistory, the chronology thus tacitly re-emphasises its author's more precise sense of its value.

In this context it is worth acknowledging some historical precursors to Houédard's own concrete poetry, notably the grid poems of the Carolingian Benedictine monk Hrabanus Maurus (784-856). Maurus's so-called "carmen cancellatum" form highlights a mesostic "intextus" within the body of a larger rectangular poem set against a background image. The intextus is thus, as Higgins notes,"'cancelled out' from the background text" (*Pattern Poetry* 230), a visual gesture employed not to supplement linguistic meaning as in Greek technopaegnia, but to divert attention away from or

through it to another message, secreted within. This negative compositional gesture links Maurus's work to Houédard's as much as the Benedictine lineage, which Houédard suggested, in a 1970 biographical note, was partly responsible for the underlying apophatic impulse:

> inevitably i feel my own work as the continuation of the unbroken tradition of benedictine poets & artists—beginning with the monastic literati of the ancient west who *created* civilization … even for part of [a later] period tho not right up till napoleon III's salon des refusés there is a wu-wei quality of playing the stringless lute in benedictine baroque as contrasted with the jesuit. ("Dom Sylvester Houédard Comments")

The following genealogy places "hrabanus maurus (concrete)" alongside other poet-monk "concretists", such as Saint Aldhelm and Saint Dunstan. Maurus's work might thus indicate an entire tradition of "Benedictine concrete" in which Houédard placed himself.[13]

In the shorter term, the poetics of French symbolism, perhaps especially Mallarmé's, seem significant, especially given Houédard's Francophone heritage. Mallarmé's reference in "Crisis in Poetry" (1896) to language's failure "to express objects by marks that correspond to them in colour and movement", and his response through the visual poesis of *Un Coup de Dés* (1897), were of course germinal to the whole concrete movement (230). But the terms by which Mallarmé felt poetry could counteract that failure seem closer to Houédard's coexistentialism than to classical concrete impressions of "object-ness": "a fragmentary disposition with alternations and oppositions, all working towards the total rhythm of the white spaces, which would be the poem silenced; but it is translated to some extent by each pendent" ("Crisis in Poetry" 232). An arrangement of language-forms around a white space standing for some ideal, inexpressible object, "translated" rather than accessed by those surrounding marks: the relationship predicates that between visible language-construction and framed internal void in Houédard's typestracts and kinetic poems.

A more immediate influence was the Polish poet Gaberbocchus co-editor Stefan Themerson, a friend of Houédard's, whose 1949 novel *Bayamus* contained his so-called "semantic poems": translations of poems which substituted words with their dictionary definitions arranged in visually arresting patterns, like this version of Li Po's "Drinking under the Moon" (71):

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| the | existence | shall | | |
| | of | continue | | |
| | this | for | | |
| | emotion | a | | every |
| | | period | which is greater than | assignable |
| | | | | quantity |

Writing about UK concrete poets in "Paradada", Houédard asserted that "stefan themerson had preceded us w/ star poems in bayamus 1949", referring to a group of star-patterned stanzas in the *Bayamus* translation of a Russian ballad (74). Themerson's influence upon Houédard's visualised language, and its humorous scepticism regarding the essential values of signs, was formative, even if in the above poem, that scepticism is implied by the dictionary entry device more than the visual layout. Houédard's spring 1963 review of various Gaberbocchus Press publications presents that scepticism as an effect of their emphasis of the obdurate materiality of signs: "that systematic ambiguity that allows no two things to be alike unless they are in at least 1 way different.…The outline of p has to be the inline of q" ("Gaberbocchus" 113).

*Kinkon*: 1963-65

Houédard began publishing concrete poetry prolifically in 1964. His *ICA Bulletin* typestracts were followed by two in *Link* 6 (June-July; "260564", "Zu as Image of Non-Zu), illustrations for his article "54-64 Poems Pomes and Peoms". "A Jackpoem", for Kerouac, appeared in *Link* 7 (September-October), and a typestract homage to I.K. Brunel in *Link* 8, alongside Morgan's Brunel homage (November-December). Two pieces featured in the first "Changing Guard" *TLS* ("140664" and "170664"); his "atom" poem was published in Chopin's *OU* 22 – republished by Openings as *Typestract: Plakat 1* (1965), the first in their Plakat series – and "Lovely/Lonely" in *POTH* 10. That winter the *Aylesford Review* printed his kinetic "Thalamus Sol", also published as a Christmas card and reprinted in *Kinkon*; his *Rock Sand Tide* poster-poem appeared around the same time.[14]

Houédard's first concrete collection *Kinkon* was published by Writers Forum in June 1965. Its alternative title, "op and kinkon poems/and some non-kinkon", reflects the scope of Houédard's work at this time: besides "non-kinkon" or "afterbeat" verse poems, there are various examples of what Houédard calls "optic" and "kinetic" pieces

(3). The former, then rarer, use graphemes as visual motifs to generate an image contained in a single visual frame: essentially typestracts, discussed later in the chapter. This section focuses on kinetic poems, more unique to the period, which occupy a series of frames between which incremental visual or phonetic developments can be tracked. They can be subdivided into three types: minimalist, object-like poems characterised by formulaic visual arrangement, interpretable in the context of Houédard's theosis-based poetics and classical concrete style; phonetically preoccupied permutational poems, composed of new or non-words, associable with a Wittgensteinian sense of language game creation; and, most indicative of his later work, and of negative representation, visual sequences oriented around an internal blank.

"Thalamus Sol" (or "Sun Bridesroom"; fig. 2), composed February 25, 1964, exemplifies the first category, presenting itself as both medium and object through an impression of iconic, self-sufficient material form indebted to classical concrete. The freeing of words from linear syntax, together with the space-separated plotting of letters, renders each line an impression of units in space rather than an implied temporal sequence. Temporal progression is instead suggested by the spaces between the lines, through the programmatic rearrangement of letters, suggesting consecutive static impressions of a landscape in flux. The cumulative effect is of a poetry which, by replacing linear grammar with a visual-linguistic syntax, presents rather than represents its objects, *becoming* the set of autonomously interacting forces and things it evokes, specifically a sunbeam moving "kinetically … east to west thru the thalamus", as Houédard's annotation states. A Finlay-esque classical restraint consolidates this effect: a small lexicon of words suggesting a palette of precisely controlled impressions; the use of their semantic meanings to annotate the visual form, and the regular, cyclical quality of change evoked. The poem can also be taken as a single image, of course, of a sunbeam slanting across a bedchamber, enhanced by "the mixup letters", which represent "specks in the beam", as Houédard remarked to Morgan in an undated note appended to a 1964 Christmas card version of the poem (presumably sent December 1964). This implied commingling of light and dust is beautifully emphasised in Bann's anthology by printing "sol" in orange letters. The poem's thematic resonances suggest that Houédard felt this poetry of interacting visual forms could revivify traditional metaphorical conceptions of union with God, as if its negative visual capacities legitimised positive expression of that state: as noted, in Catholic mysticist writing the

metaphor of the bride or virgin often indicates the relationship of soul or inner mind to God; Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* also exemplifies the tendency.

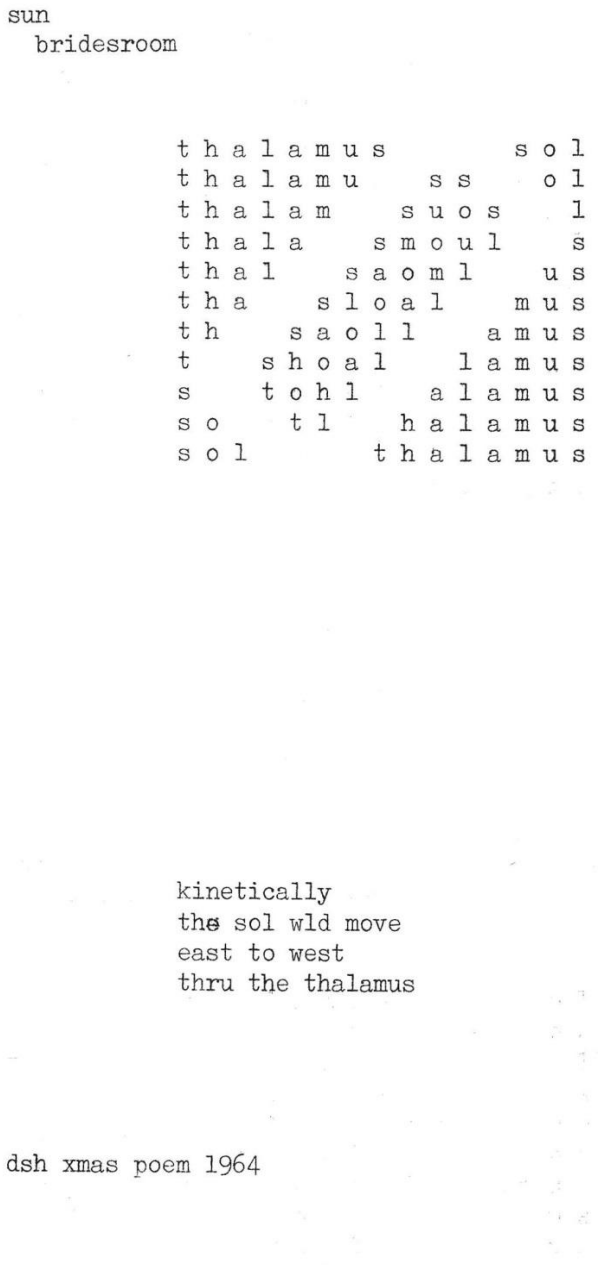



Fig. 2. "Thalamus Sol".

It is thus significant that the "thalamus" is also a section of the brain responsible for sensory stimulation. But Houédard's specific reference, as he added in his note to Morgan, is Psalm 19.5, translated in the 1966 *Jerusalem Bible* as follows: "High above, he pitched a tent for the sun,/ who comes out of his pavilion like a bridegroom,/ exulting like a hero to run his race" (Ps. 19.5; 801). Houédard worked on the *Jerusalem Bible* as New Testament literary editor; but a letter to Morgan (July 26, 1964) suggests his duties extended to the translation of Psalms, an Old Testament Chapter: the above passage might thus bear traces of his input:

> (trans psalms
> revising trans of NT)
> (its HARDEST work of all
> putting things like that into acceptable prose)
> (ie cutting pious fuck & all the THEE/THOU shit).

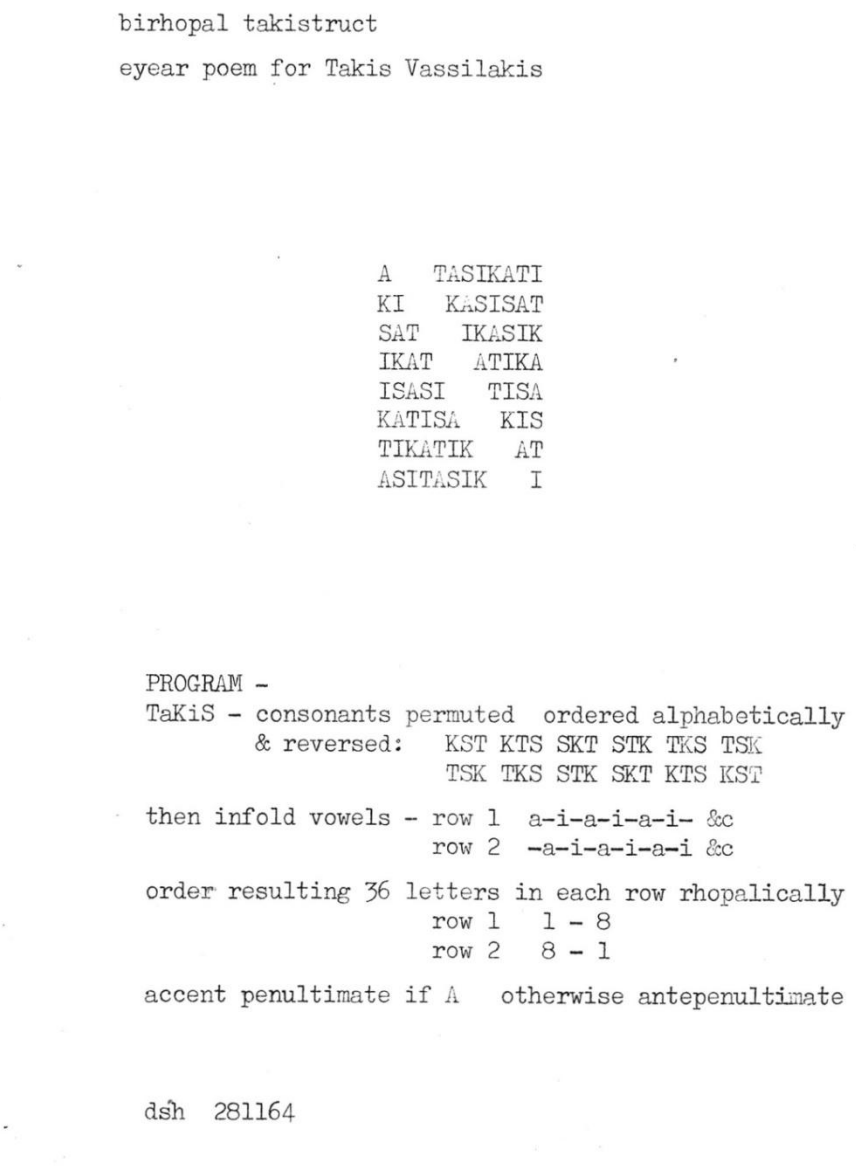
The psalm is seasonally significant, "used in many xmas anthems we have ad nauseam", as Houédard's undated note continues, and broadly indicative of God's relationship to his subjects:

> the thalamus is either the bridechamber meaning the canopy over the bride ie the sky – or the underworld out of wh the sun comes … in anthem sol is xpt [Houédard's term for Christ, based on the Christogram or ancient Greek Χριστός] & thalamus is mary or israel – or xpt as sol … comes from heaven (canopy) but more basically is idea of A from B thru C to us (yinyang yabyum & all other myth bases). (ibid.)

"Thalamus" is not only the bridal chamber or virgin womb of inner mind, but also the earth, sky,or Israel, above which the sun, or God, passes from eastern sunrise to western sunset. Interestingly, Houédard adds that the "original psalm is babylonian to god SHAMSH & later adopted to EL (YHWH)". The metaphor's interfaith significance suits his ecumenical sensibilities, and tempers its status as a "conventional image" for union with God.[15]

Such poems, presented as sets of objects rather than signs, exemplify the use of kinetic form to suggest the transcendent capacities which Houédard sometimes ascribed to concrete grammar. Other *Kinkon* poems instead use phonetic permutation to create strings of neologisms, suggesting an interest in the process by which new language was

created. A good example is his "Birhopal Takistract" (fig. 3), a tribute to the Greek artist and composer Takis Vassilakis, to be read from top to bottom of the left and right triangles in turn. Phonetic patterns are amplified by the removal of semantic sense, which also severs the clarifying link between annotation and pictorial image, creating a series of enunciation-tempting phonetic constructions which make the poem more like a set of words than a set of objects. That those words are nonsensical suggests both Houédard's general preoccupation with avoiding representation, and a particular interest in the process by which *new* words were made. That emphasis on language creation is enhanced by the compositional "progam" appended to the poem, which reveals that to create the poem, the three consonants of "Takis" were arranged in their six possible combinations, which were then placed alphabetically across the first triangle – *KST KTS SKT STK TKS TSK* – and in reverse order across the second. The name's vowels were then "infold[ed]", occupying odd and even letter positions respectively in the two rows, which were then arranged "rhopalically", each line containing one letter more than the previous; although the second line is anti-rhopalic. Besides invoking the poetry-composing computers of Milan and Stuttgart, this "program" suggests an interest in setting the rules for language games. Although negative representation was partly a defence against the notion of a reality shaped by language, Houédard's 1960s criticism also embraces that notion, for the potentially reality-shaping power it granted the poet. In "The Third Bridge" (1965), Houédard wrote: "art is in a wittgenstein phase -- words (poems: ikons) arnt what we put ideas into -- ideas are what we have if we know the rules of the wordgame or ikongame -- the poet as maker ... of the rules never preoccupied wittgenstein -- it preoccupies max bense & the noigandres -- hence semiotic poetry" (24). Houédard also associated this capacity with sonic concrete poetry like Cobbing's, noting in "Bob Cobbing: Troubadour & Poet" (1966) that "language is anything we think in" (3). The "takistract's" phonetic emphasis confirms that preoccupation, even if its creation of signs – and thus reality – is metaphorical rather than literal. In fact, the poem may have been a response to Cobbing's *Sound Poems*, first circulated to poets including Houédard at the end of November 1964, when the takistract was composed. Its formulaic permutation of letters is very similar to that of sections of *Sound Poems* such as "T" and "H", and new to Houédard's work; its "program" also contains an equally unprecedented performance instruction regarding "accent" suggestively reminiscent of those in *Sound Poems*. More generally, despite his



birhopal takistruct

eyear poem for Takis Vassilakis

A TASIKATI
KI KASISAT
SAT IKASIK
IKAT ATIKA
ISASI TISA
KATISA KIS
TIKATIK AT
ASITASIK I

PROGRAM -
TaKiS - consonants permuted ordered alphabetically
& reversed: KST KTS SKT STK TKS TSK
TSK TKS STK SKT KTS KST

then infold vowels - row 1 a-i-a-i-a-i- &c
row 2 -a-i-a-i-a-i-a &c

order resulting 36 letters in each row rhopalically
row 1 1 - 8
row 2 8 - 1

accent penultimate if A otherwise antepenultimate

dsh 281164

Fig. 3. "Birhopal Takistract: Eyear Poem for Takis Vassilakis".

visual preoccupations, Houédard's interest in sound poetry, and concrete's sonic variants, should not be overlooked. He referred to his own sound poems as "mantras" to distinguish them from his visual poems or "yantras", performing mantras at festivals such as Arlington Une (July-October 1966), the first of the series at Arlington Mill in Bibury, Gloucestershire, owned by Verey's father (1966-68). In the early 1970s he co-edited the sound poetry journal *Kroklok* with Cobbing. Houédard's 1972 article

"Supertonic Boom or Babbling as an Artform" associates sound poetry with an emotive expressive state acquired by infants after their first, goal-oriented uses of vocal noise, but before their use of language to express emotion: a kind of pre-linguistic speech.

But the *Kinkon* pieces most indicative of his later work are those kinetic poems in which the shifting linguistic construction is presented neither as iconic object or nonce word, but as the frame around a void. These are poems of negative representation, reflecting on the relationship between subjective thought and inner mind: the object of focus is not the construction but the empty space it shapes, the construction a visual representation of thought oriented around it, in knowledge of its impenetrability. "Four Stages of Spiritual Typewriting" (fig. 4) is an exemplar of the form: four disintegrating yin/yang-like constructions of dots and slashes, set in conjoined squares of full stops. The final square stands empty. A lexical key identifies the left-hand dot as "Je", the right as "Moi": terms Houédard used to indicate mind as the means and object of thought respectively. In a letter to the Themersons of March 1, 1975, now stored with the Themersons Archive, Houédard credited their development in self-mythologising terms to a realisation made at the age of eight:

> how absurd it was to talk about my body & my mind & my 'soul' &c &c while making no provision for the 'I' that owned them [so] i formulated the distinction between the JE & the MOI which i still find the most helpful insight into Buddhism & yoga ... in other ways too – especially in apophatic theologies.

The first construction shows the subjective mind, "Je", focused through the lens of thought, represented by a slash, upon its own nucleus, "Moi". In the second, "Moi" disappears, as the subject, aided by the spiritual mechanism of the typewriter, registers the chimerical nature of its sense of its inner self. The unpublished poem "R.I.P Moi" (January 1, 1966) also sums up the sentiment:

> looking inside my sweltering
> moi
> I saw a lovely
> deep
> freeze
> je

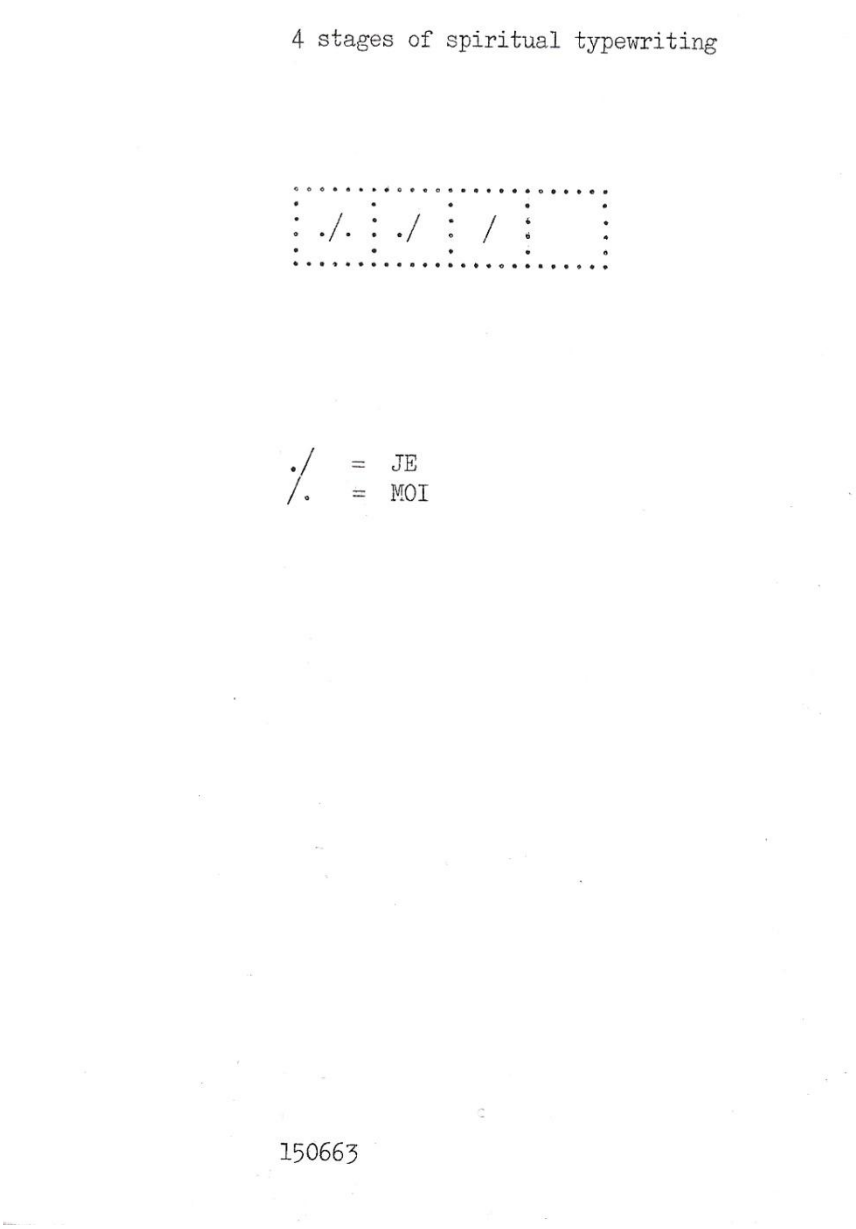



Fig. 4. “Four Stages of Spiritual Typewriting”.

In the third box “Je” too disintegrates, as the inessential self shaped by these chimerical impressions is also renounced. In the final square, the slash or screen by which subjective thought both approaches and is separated from its centre also dissolves. This blank space represents both a resulting union with God, and the impossibility of that state’s expression. The second principle of negative representation is thus inaugurated:

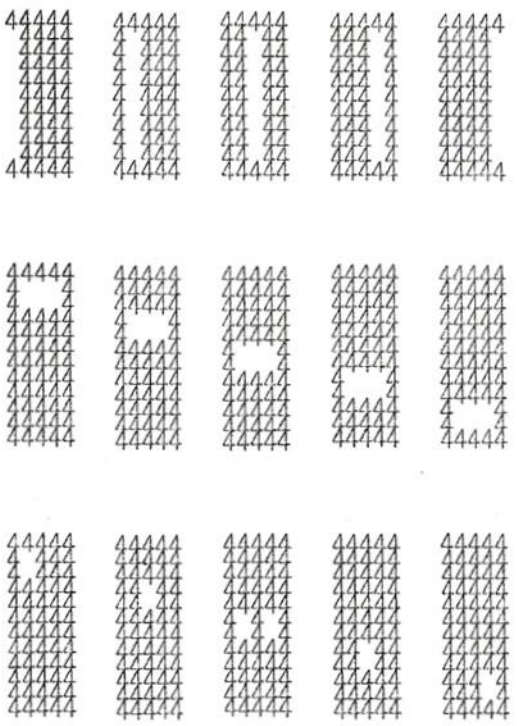



Fig. 5. “4”.

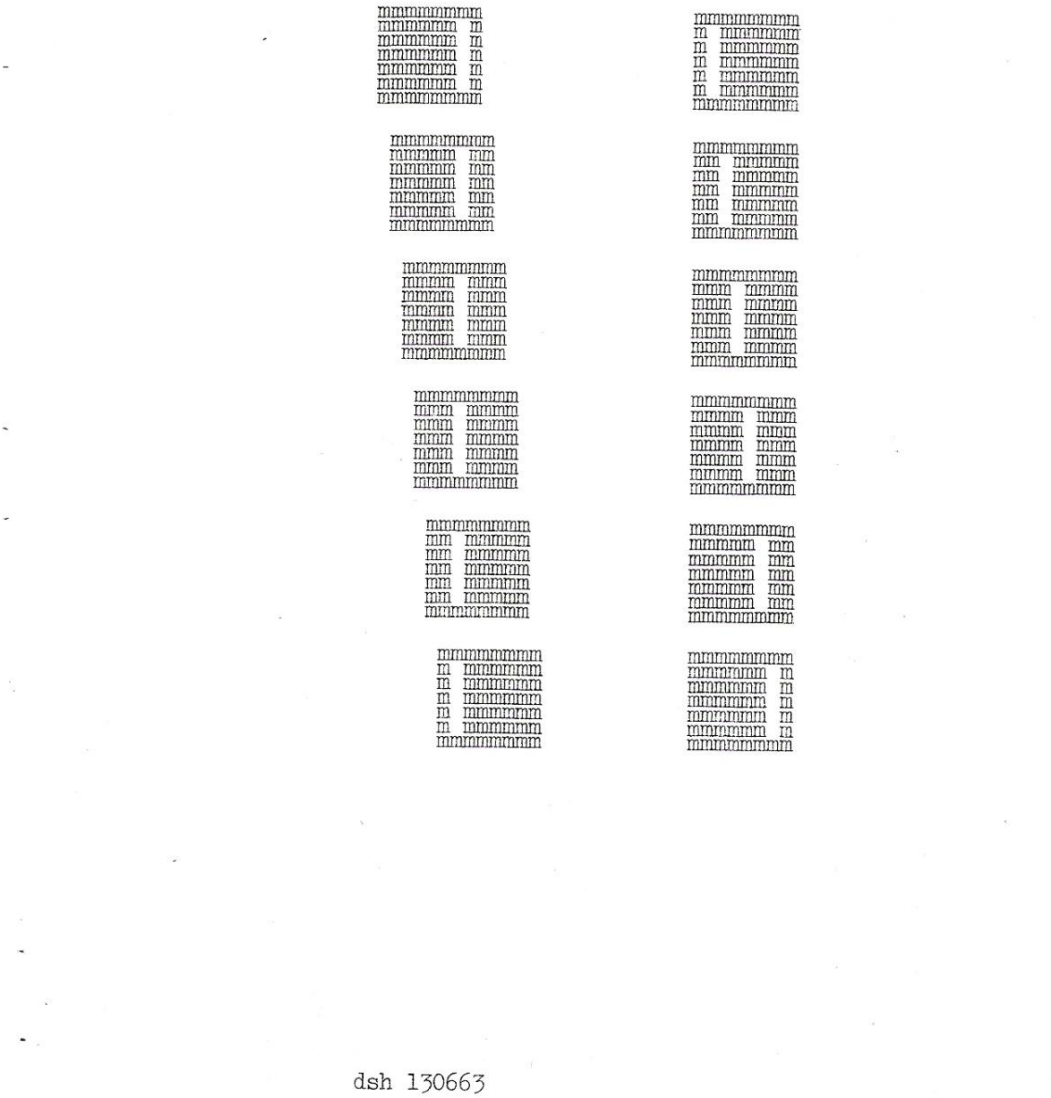



Fig. 6. “Om”.

not just the use of a non-semantic, visual-linguistic poetry, but the turning of that poetic grammar away from its unknowable object, instead focusing on the state of thought or prayer shaped around it.

The space thus framed is reframed across the remainder of the collection, notably in an untitled poem comprising three rows of rectangles formed from *4*s, permeated by an internal gap moving incrementally across them (fig. 5). Visually, it suggests electronic or neural impulses, perhaps cybernetic mechanisms. Repetition of a single character, ideographic rather than phonetic, removes language's referents and seems to silence it. Yet that non-representative quality, rather than rendering the poem a pseudo-object, expresses its ignominy as a sign in depicting its actual, unthinkable object, indicated by the blank peepholes within: inner mind, union with God. Its crowning and nuancing feature, however, is the budding of that gap in the bottom central rectangle, suggesting some momentary, autonomous communication of inner mind to outer: a void winking or blinking in affirmation. The poem on the following page (fig. 6), composed eight days earlier, is very similar: squares of *m*s punctured by rectangular gaps which render them *o*s, reintegrating phonetic sound in an approximation of the Buddhist mantric unit "om". The first of the poems' two vertical columns is shifted incrementally across the page, reoriented around a stationary gap which thus itself seems to be moving; the optical trickery is comparable to the contemporaneous op art of Bridget Riley. In the second column, the gap itself is shifted by the same increments. Besides the qualities this poem shares with the previous one, this contrast between actual and implied movement makes it seem a rumination on the distinction between meditation and self-projection: between attention to an object, and the unwitting substitution of that object with a subjective impression of it.

Concrete, Ecumenism and the Counter-Culture.

Houédard's early forays into concrete poetry coincided with his first interactions with the UK counter-culture. Notwithstanding the foregoing emphasis on concrete as poetry as notation of an intensely private awareness, he also connected it to that culture's anti-authoritarian social imperatives, its non-representative aspects, he felt, allowing the reader to decant their own symbolic associations into the poem, creating a microcosm of non-authoritarian social interaction. This indicates an alternative reading of most of

the work discussed in this chapter, but seems especially pertinent to his machine-poem projects, which form the basis of the following discussion. First, however, I clarify this aspect of Houédard's poetics by considering both the counter-cultural and religious terms by which concrete poetry could underpin an anarchistic political ideology. I also contextualise Houédard's engagement with the counter-culture by reference to the promotion of ecumenical dialogue in the Catholic Church during the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), typified by Houédard's own conception of "wider ecumenism".

The "counter-culture" referenced is essentially that identified by Jeff Nuttall in *Bomb Culture* (1968), whose "fundamental purpose" he summarises as follows:

> [T]he current technological/commercial/industrial/rational civilization is suicidal, it must be destroyed; a new culture, based on total freedom, extended sensibility, and spirituality of some kind re-established in the place of politics must be developed at breakneck pace and spread among the people; human communication must be freed of the limitations of language; people must be induced to identify with humanity rather than with class or nation; fear for security must be shifted from the centre of human affairs and aspiration towards human fulfillment in terms of vitality, ecstasy, and delight be put in its place. (174)

This movement was predicated on a "total freedom" germinating in the spheres of art and personal expression, characterised by expression liberated from medium boundaries, spreading outwards to encompass systems of socioeconomic organization, which would thereby become plural and fluid: un-stratified by ideological or military power. It gained momentum and coherence, Nuttall asserts, through events like the Aldermaston marches, jazz and beat culture, and later, the anti-psychiatry and anti-university movements, artistic genres such as auto-destructive art and happenings, and the wave of protests still ongoing when the book was published.

This then, was a culture within which a medium-defying mode of artistic expression could form the basis of an anarchistic political ethos. Houédard's 1960s criticism grants concrete poetry such power because of its capacity to integrate the visual and linguistic, and thus to evade positive meaning through the relativising combination of the two registers, forging space for the interpreter's own symbolic associations to shape the poem: a blueprint for a form of non-authoritarian socialisation. Associating that quality with both concrete and auto-destructive art in "Aesthetics of the Deathwish" (1966), Houédard stated that "merely to present the gap seems to constitute

the lightest & briefest of fingers on the trigger – the least fascist invitation to engage spectator interest & participations – & so create a primitive human selfregulating society" (49). Essentially, this political power was a different way of quantifying the effects of negative representation and coexistentialism, as is clear from Houédard's introduction to the *Arlington Une* catalogue, which stresses links between a poetry occupying the interstices of media and the collapse of geographical, social and ethnic boundaries:

> arlington-une begins w/ the idea that poetry frontiers have been shifting & in fact are being shifted … by crossing and demolishing boundaries [poets] have made it clear that only an aesthetics of nationalism & apartheid could ever continue to defend them … poetry now … hovers round the poets & societys own inner borders frontiers limits & definitions as well as those between the classic disciplines … ("Arlington Une/Poetischesuntersuchungen in Glostershire" [5])

By invoking these ideals for concrete poetry, Houédard was tapping into an internationally burgeoning sensibility, typified in some respects by Higgins's conception of "intermedia". But the basis upon which he approached them was clearly unique, and can also be defined by recourse to his religious beliefs. The renunciation of subjective expression manifested in his concrete poetry, that is, was one facet of a general imperative of selflessness also encompassing a loving engagement with outer creation comparable to counter-cultural ideals of social interaction, themselves defined by Nuttall in terms of "spirituality". Indeed, in "D-r-a-w-n-I-n-w-a-r-d" (1982), Houédard refuted the idea that by drawing the mind inward, attention was drawn away from the outer world, asserting God's hidden presence in both the mind and the outer universe perceptible to it, which is "his image in the same way that every poem is the image of the poet"; "our only means of access to him" (142). Inward attention is presented not as a means of turning away from the universe, but of concentrating on one aspect of it: "not flight *from* the world but *through* the world" (143).

The political imperatives of Houédard's poetics can thus be seen as the result of a dialogue between his faith and the counter-culture; that such dialogue could occur reflects aspects of both contemporary Catholic culture and Houédard's personal beliefs associable with the Second Vatican Council (October 1962-December 1965), associable with a spirit of "aggiornamento" ("bringing up to date") exemplified by ecumenism:

increased interaction with other religions, and with nonreligious spiritualities and ethics. One of the aims of "Beat and Afterbeat", written during the council's proceedings, was to present poetry as the mouthpiece for such dialogue: "[p]oetry all art is one of universal worships à l'insu of god the unknown: real atheism is the absence of *any* ultimate ideal & what Vat II is ABOUT is universal need to re-phrase without loss of content so as to communicate with the non-us" (140). Houédard's unique contribution to "Vat II" ecumenism, besides his poetry, was an idea he called the "wider ecumenism" which, as the former Abbot of Prinknash Dom Aldhelm Cameron-Brown noted, writing in response to Bann's 1992 obituary for Houédard, promoted "dialogue between the different great religions", in particular "the mystical traditions of Christianity, Buddhism and Sufism". The idea's development can be tracked across various *Aylesford Review* articles, many of them reviews of books on oriental religion: "Heathen Holiness" (1960), "East and West – New Perspectives" (1961), "Men-Men and Right Mind-Minding" (1963) – which displays early traces of Houédard's distinctive beat-prose style – and "The Wider Ecumenism" (1965). That last essay concretises the concept, calling for a global "human" culture based on nondenominational religious foundations, surpassing a "basically jewish-greek-northeuropean synthesis" to incorporate both "the regional insights of african-indian-eastern genius" and "the nonregional insights of technological mentalities that are today's mental theophanies" (118-19). Clearly, Houédard's ultimate goal was some universal, nondenominational spiritual community which would incorporate "nonregional insights" from outside organised faith: including those of the counter-culture, as an unpublished poem composed April 28, 1963 makes clear:

this holy
paganism
of a
post xn
world
is precious
fortunately
not in the eyes
of the pious
but
of the lord

Houédard's interest in "holy pagans" partly explains the way in which poets and artists gravitated around him in the West Country, coalescing into the collective christened the "Gloup" by Jonathan Williams; also the invitations he extended to poets and "beatniks" to visit Prinknash in the 1960s: "pilgrims/ in … holyblue/ atheist pants", as one *Kinkon* poem describes them ("For Pat/Rob/Pat/Rob/Pat/Rob/Robbbbb").[16]

These counter-cultural ideals can theoretically be posited within any "coexistentialist" concrete poem, in which image and language interact. However his 1965 chronology associates that coexistentialist quality, and thus presumably that ideal, particularly with the Gloup's so-called "machine poems". In fact, many of these machine-poems, including many of Houédard's projected ones, abdicate authorial control not by creating a non-representative poetry "where ikon and logos identify", but by allowing reading order to be determined either by an automatic mechanism or by reader interaction: Cox's motorised, rotating mobile poems exemplify the former category; Furnival's vending machine-like *Babacus*, "read" using handles on its side to produce different word combinations, typifies the latter.[17] Nonetheless, these poems exemplify Houédard's ideal of non-authoritarian interaction in microcosm.

Houédard designed many "machine poems", apparently taking the term to denote any off-the-page poem involving a reader-operated or automatic reading mechanism, thus potentially something as simple as his origami fortune-teller version of *Frog Pond Plop* – his translation of a Basho haiku – in which the three words are spread across the three reading surfaces. But few were made. His "Chronobiography/ Autozoography" refers to "unfolding & opening poems" designed from 1963 onwards, resulting in "28 kinetic poem projects for cambridge 1st international of kinkon – none made" (27). In his letter of July 26, 1964 to Morgan, he described some of his ideas for that exhibition:

> motorising typestracts is a bit tricky
> i thought of a sort of )typewriter( roller
> that just went round …
> chopin wants to film them growing
> falling
> to me the creation of them is
> … mechanised
> & the films the nearest to that …

Discussing plans for Bann's 1967 Brighton Festival concrete exhibition with its curator (January 17, 1967), Houédard lamented "i now have well over 50 poetry machines designed since the series i did for the cambridge expo – not one has ever yet been made". He goes on to propose a version of the poem *Mind-Trip* "as a clackerboard or 'jacobstaircase' ": perhaps the one non-paper "machine poem" actually constructed: an oversized jacob's ladder with four slats which, when flipped, convert the word "mind", spelled downwards across the four, into the word "trip" (ibid.).[18]

Houédard's description of his *Book of 12 Mudras* (1967) also seems relevant, although the publication itself has sadly proved untraceable: a folder containing twelve paper sculpture-poems for assembly by the reader – a process perhaps interpretable as a reading mechanism – to which he assigned many of the values as machine poetry. In a letter to Bann (March 24, 1967) he describes them as:

> totally wordless completely abstract GESTURE POEMS in paper … a point where POETRY PAINTING SCULPTURE ALL merge & identify … absolutely quite exactly as such poems as they are paintings or sculptures (… all total sheets using the total area – flaps & traps cut in are flexed & distorted out of the 2-d plane & slot into either themselves or slits provided) ... its like what cant be described in prose OR in poetry words – except in the reader–participation act of putting one of my mudra-poems together. (ibid.)

Houédard connects the "mudra-poems" to an ideal of non-authoritarian interaction both by their intermedial, coexistentialist form, and by the reader's control over the assembly process, an interactive "reading" experience distinct from engagement with "prose or poetry words".

It is finally worth noting that Houédard's prolific critical writing did much to generate a conception of concrete poetry in England and Scotland which stood in fruitful friction with the more structuralist or constructivist accounts of Bann or Weaver, endorsing multi-media techniques – not necessarily "intermedial" – as talismans of counter-cultural ideals. Those ideals were also reflected in his publishing activities: notwithstanding its stylistic range, Openings press partly made an alternative aspect of concrete poetry visible within England and Scotland to the Wild Hawthorn's emphasis on beauty and precision. Chaotic, quasi-linguistic works like Houédard's *Typestract 1* (1965), with its overlapping and clashing structures formed from the word "atom", and Julien Blaine's *Engrenage* plakat (1966), embodied the coexistentialist energy which

Houédard took as indicative of concrete's counter-cultural possibilities.

Typestracts: 1967-72

Notwithstanding such associations, Houédard's typestracts, upon which, as Everitt notes, "his reputation finally rests", ultimately employed negative representation not to create a poem malleable enough for the reader to shape its meaning, but to emphasise the impossibility of expressing its object (40). To this end, they activated both of the elementary principles associable with negative representation: erasure of semantic meaning, through use of language as abstract visual substance, in which linguistic association nonetheless subsists, and the turning of positive focus away from union with God towards meditation, prayer, or, especially in the typestracts' case, Tantric ritual. Typestracts also have certain common visual qualities, some of which were clarified by Morgan, who coined the term "typestract", in a letter to Robert Burchfield, editor of the Oxford English Dictionary, on January 10, 1978. Attempting unsuccessfully to have the word added to the dictionary, Morgan recounted first using it around November 20, 1963:

> Houédard [had] sent me some of his 'typewriter poems' (there was as yet no term for them), and I wrote back enthusiastically about them, referring to them as typestracts. The term arose swiftly and spontaneously in the course of writing the letter, but I suppose it was a portmanteau word from 'typewriter' and 'abstract'.

The typestract's visual form is "abstract" then, bereft of obvious figurative device, and, as Morgan also states, relies on typewritten appearance as "an essential component of the effect" (ibid.). A typestract's visual design also generally displays a certain intricacy and skill, often creating an illusory third dimension through diagonals; although Houédard's early typestracts (ca.1963-65) tend towards two-dimensional textural effects. Foregoing these earlier typestracts, I assess three collections, *A Book of Chakras* (1967), *Tantric Poems Perhaps* (1967) and *Like Contemplation* (1972), following a summary of the form's visual affinities with Arabic calligraphy, early-twentieth-century typewriter art, and Tantric "yantra".[19]

Before turning to this discussion, it is worth acknowledging, given the extent to

which the typestracts sacrifice semantic meaning, that Houédard's particular critical apparatus must be invoked to justify their presentation as poetry rather than visual art: the idea that the coexistence of the visual and linguistic was a foundational tenet of concrete poetry, but that semantic meaning was not. Not all critics shared this view. Mike Weaver, in a letter to the *TLS* (March 7, 1968), responded unfavourably to Willetts's comparable description of concrete poetry as "a hybrid art" which "calls itself 'poetry'" but is in fact "a deviation from poetry, graphic design and typography alike into a little-cultivated area where these three arts mix" ("Concrete Poetry" 193). Referencing Reichardt's 1965 exhibition – and probably Houédard's chronology – Weaver criticised the "absurd idea" that concrete poetry was "somehow Between Poetry and Painting", describing it as "an aesthetic rather than a medium,...intra-medial much more importantly than it is inter-medial,…a constructive method for all the arts *separately* rather than an 'intuitive' means of mixing them". The terms of the broader debate between, roughly speaking, classically oriented critics of concrete, and those concerned with its capacity to overrun medium boundaries, are clearly inferable here, making the typestracts somewhat indicative of the values with which the latter group imbued the form.

Although Houédard's first typestracts were composed in 1963, his *Between Poetry and Painting* catalogue entry recalls a prototypical method developed in Bangalore in 1945, during his time with military intelligence: "typewriter arabesques (that led direct to typestracts)" ("Dom Pierre Sylvester Houédard" 51). A 1979 exhibition note connects this to a visual influence from Arabic calligraphy which, as Higgins notes, uses "systematic distortion of letter forms for decorative or expressive effect" (*Pattern Poetry* 166): "[d]uring 1945 I realised the typewriter's control of verticals and horizontals, balancing its mechanism for release from its own imposed grid, offered possibilities that suggested (I was in India at the time) the grading of Islamic calligraphy from cursive (naskhi) writing through cufic to the abstract formal arabesque" (Houédard "Notes by the Artist"). Presumably the typewriter's "imposed grid" of square character spaces suggested the square inscription spaces used in so-called Square Kufic writing. However, the typestracts are best connected not to the Kufic order, in which "letters are distorted from their usual normative forms into special shapes" (Higgins *Pattern Poetry* 166), but to the Arabesque, in which shapes allusive of letters are used to build up purely visual designs, retaining only the kind of "lingering literary hookup" which Morgan identified

in the typestracts ("Houédard, Dom (Pierre) Sylvester").[20]

The typestracts' visual forms also relate to Western art, of course, perhaps specifically that subcategory of early-twentieth-century multimedia experiment which employed the typewriter as a visual tool. The anonymous typewriter images by Bauhaus students reproduced in Alan Riddell's *Typewriter Art* (1975), for example, uncannily mirror the typestracts in their suggestion of geometrical forms in three-dimensional space (27-29). But the most concerted typewriter-art project of the period was the series of "tiksels" made by the printer-painter H.N. Werkman from 1923-29. Named after the Dutch infinitive "tikken" 'to type', Werkman's tiksels – which, as Alston Purvis notes, were "never exhibited or published in his lifetime", being a secondary concern to his "druksels", paintings made on the printing press (54) – contain agglomerations of curved or straight lines built up from typewriter strokes. This visual use of type foreshadows the typestracts, as does the fact that, unlike the contemporary typewritten sound-scores of Pietro de Saga, for example, they were solely for visual consumption. The differences are that the tiksels generally employ repeated letter-forms to build up a textural impression rather than a set of geometrical shapes, and that they thus appear to be composed spontaneously and expressionistically, a method debarred by the mathematical precision of typestract composition.[21]

The typestracts are distinguished from modern Western art more generally by their function: to represent a state of being focused upon union with God, and thus to indirectly express that state itself. In this sense they are more like the "yantras" of Tantric art: diagrams of states to be passed through to integrate the viewer with a cosmic creative process. The annotations accompanying many of the typestracts are permeated by references to Tantra; Houédard's preface to *Tantric Poems Perhaps*, distinguishing between different types of Tantric art – "mantras (like sound om) & yantras (like calligraphed om or a mandala)" – notes "ive done yantras mantras and mudras[,] these are yantras".

Defining the typestracts' aesthetic value thus involves clarifying the role of yantra in Tantric thought and ritual, which has roots in both Hinduism and Buddhism. Philip Rawson's *The Art of Tantra* (1973) describes the Tantric creative principle in terms based on Hindu variants: Tantra, he states, "proclaims everything … to be the active play of a female creative principle, the Goddess of many forms, sexually penetrated by an invisible, indescribable, seminal male. In ultimate fact He has generated Her for his

own enjoyment. And the play, because it is analogous to the activity of sexual intercourse, is pleasurable to her" (9-10). The relationship is similar to that between God and inner mind: an indivisible if more overtly sexualised union responsible for the entire universe's existence, impalpable to the individuated subject just as inner mind is to outer. In this sense, Houédard's embrace of Tantra exemplifies his wider ecumenism: his interest in positing universal theistic principles. The energy or essence of this ongoing creative process is concentrated at certain points in the body and world; Tantric practice aims to merge subjective being with that energy through a practice focused around these points of energy, called "sādhana", "i.e. psychosomatic effort, assimilating his own body to higher and higher levels of cosmic body-pattern. In the end he may become identical with the original double-sexed deity, which is involved, without beginning or end, in blissful intercourse with itself" (Rawson 14). Much sādhana involves mimicking the creative process, often through ritual sex, although in a letter printed in *Studio International* in 1967, Houédard defined Buddhist sādhana as less intrinsically sexualised than Hindu: "where the Hindu seeks spiritual power through union with the active shakti or female aspect of divinity, the Buddhist seeks wisdom through union with the passive cosmic mother" ("Tantrism and Tantric Sense" 7). Tantric art provides "maps of the system, together with detailed instructions for working the mechanism": diagrams showing those points of concentrated energy, and how to interact with them (Rawson 14). Yantra is simply that which is visual in effect, the most common type of yantra being a two-dimensional circular pattern set inside square perimeters, made up of concentric patterned rings signifying successive "stages or 'sheaths' of inwardness" to be passed through in turn, set around a central point "where all the original radiating energies are finally focused" (Rawson 72).

This visual form is not predominant in the typestracts, although their sequences of incrementally altering shapes do suggest the yantra's "sheaths of inwardness". The influence of yantra is rather functional. In a sense, it feeds the transcendentalist aspect of Houédard's poetics, in that yantras diagrammatise locations assumed to contain a divine energy, which might thus be seen as directly represented, even captured, in the typestracts. However, those points really indicate states to be passed through, to attain an ultimate state which Houédard always defined as unrepresentable, reflecting his particular interest in Buddhist Tantra. In a lecture on "Apophatic Art" presented on September 9, 1966 during Gustav Metzger's Destruction in Art Symposium – whose

organising committee Houédard sat on with Cobbing and Sharkey – he connected auto-destruction with the Tantric impulse, stating: "to 'fi9d' the ce9tre of the ma9dala [a primarily Tibetan Buddhist term for circular yantras] is9t to look FOR it – but to BE it i9 the gradual process of destroyi9g the me9tal ma9dala from edge towards ce9tre".[22] The final "satori" achieved through focus on the yantra occurs only after its destruction: Houédard credits a transcendent state of being, certainly, but a visually unrepresentable one; the yantra merely represents, and invokes, a series of prior sensory states. In this sense, the comparison augments Houédard's sense of concrete poetry as a representation of thought or prayer focused on union with God, only negatively representing that object itself; although clearly, that "God" must be re-envisaged in this context as a more syncretic creative force. An unpublished poem from 1963 suggests Houédard's sense of the equivalence of prayer and sādhana, or one aspect of it at least: "poetry? he said/poetrys dangerous/it's like prayer/ nothing but/misplaced/ sex".

*A Book of Chakras* (1967) was Houédard's first typestract collection, a folio of loose sheets lithographed and published at Watford School of Art. Its title, and the two alternative titles on its inner sleeves – "8 yantric poems"; "first rotoplate studies towards a book of chakras entitled: mechanical fingers by dsh for inner moon pointing" – connect it to a particular branch of Tantric ritual: yoga. In yogic teaching, chakras are discs placed along channels in the "subtle body" – the body in a spiritual state aloof to surgical study – called "nadīs", through which creative energy circulates: examples of the points of energy already referred to. In everyday experience this energy generates subjective reality, through projection outwards against a screen called "prakṛiti". But yogic sādhana diverts it inwards, concentrating it within a sequence of chakras moving upwards from the genitals to the head, generating consecutive states of trans-subjective being by incrementally merging subjectivity with the body's inner energy flow. The depiction of chakras in yantra thus entails a "map of the system": of energy points accessed to achieve consecutively higher states of being, pending a final, un-representable condition. The collection's titles suggest that its constituent poems should be interpreted as such: "yantric poems" depicting "chakras" or "inner moons". This connection is assessed below, as is a related allusion to auto-destruction.

These typestracts evoke both yantra and chakra through their use of circular and spherical forms: one piece, composed on March 10, 1967, annotated as "Chakra-Ficta", comprises a series of horizontal lines formed from repeated dashes, closely aligned at

the top and bottom of the page, spread further apart across the middle section, within which a circular shape is suggested by setting the lines within it fractionally above the surrounding ones. "Wordwomb", composed the previous day, contains a flat circle whose left half is formed from lines of *a*s, the right from *i*s. Using diagonal lines to suggest three-dimensional space, Houédard depicts another circle perpendicular to the first, passing upright through its centre. One half, formed from *o*s, protrudes behind it; the other, formed from *e*s, juts forwards. The central vertical join between the two, the diameter of the "wordwomb", is a single line of *u*s. This perhaps suggests the capacity of yoga to birth new states of subjectivity, new "yous", the sonorous vocal sounds suggested by the five vowels invoking the mantras chanted during the process.

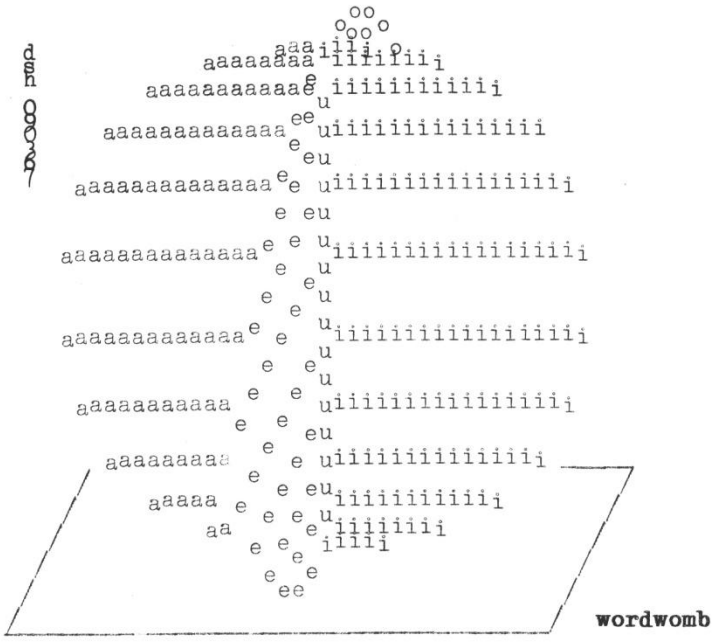



Fig. 7. "Wordwomb".

Importantly, although the chakra is an emblem of a state to be passed through to reach ultimate bliss, it too is held to contain a divine energy which Houédard perhaps saw as visually unrepresentable; even though in Tantric teaching the yantra itself becomes infused with that energy during sādhana. These poems are thus presented as the typist's mechanically constrained representations of chakras – "mechanical fingers for inner moon pointing" – rather than those points of energy or "inner moons" themselves. As Houédard noted in his *Arlington Une* introduction, a poem "can be a finger but not the moon" ("Arlington Une" 9). The same idea is reflected in many of these poems by the representation of a chakra through a partially articulated space, as if full representation were impossible. One piece, annotated "Chakrometer", depicts the outer surface of an upright cylinder using conjoined dashes; its implied central shaft remains impenetrable, invisible (fig. 8). The cascading phrase set around it defines the apophatic principle animating the image: "w/out/ knowing/ but/ to know/ you arnt". As Sharkey notes, many of Houédard's typestracts seem "pushed into shape by the internal emptiness" in this way (Introduction 18).

As Houédard's *Studio International* letter makes clear, he felt that much modern western art since "the collective satori Europe experienced through the Dadaists" was Tantric in orientation, perhaps especially auto-destruction ("Tantrism" 7). The connection lay, he felt, in an admission of the limits of subjective expression reflected in an emphasis on non-representation, the "principle of nothingness": as in "the silence pauses gaps of Cage, Lamonte Young, Phillips and Tilbury—the zones of pure possibility of Nul, Zero, Nart and DIAS…." (ibid.) In the case of auto-destruction, as Houédard noted in his DIAS lecture, that connection was reflected by the fact that the artwork's materials had to be destroyed to achieve the non-representable state or moment comprising the artwork, just as the yantra had to be conceptually destroyed to bring about the unrepresentable moment of satori. This connection is broadly suggested by "Auto-de-chakra-struction" (fig. 9), a piece stamped with a dedicatory "gm" for Metzger: a chakra-disc formed from waterfalls of brackets, surrounded by a wave of @s spreading downwards from the page's top left corner, penetrating its borders. Without its annotative phrase, this image's connection to auto-destruction might be opaque; the typestract's theme is often consolidated by the linguistic tag in this way.

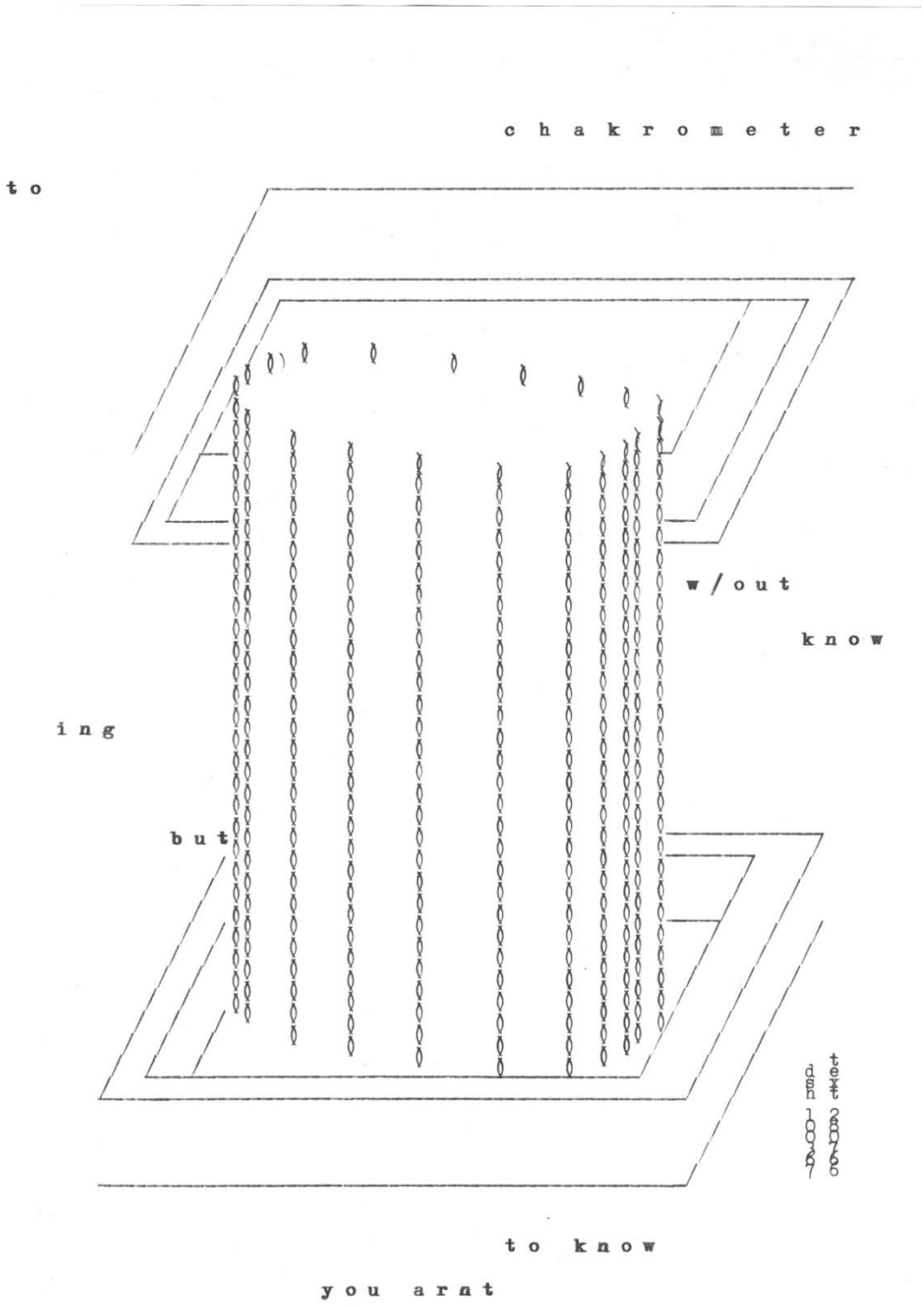



Fig. 8. “Chakrometer”.

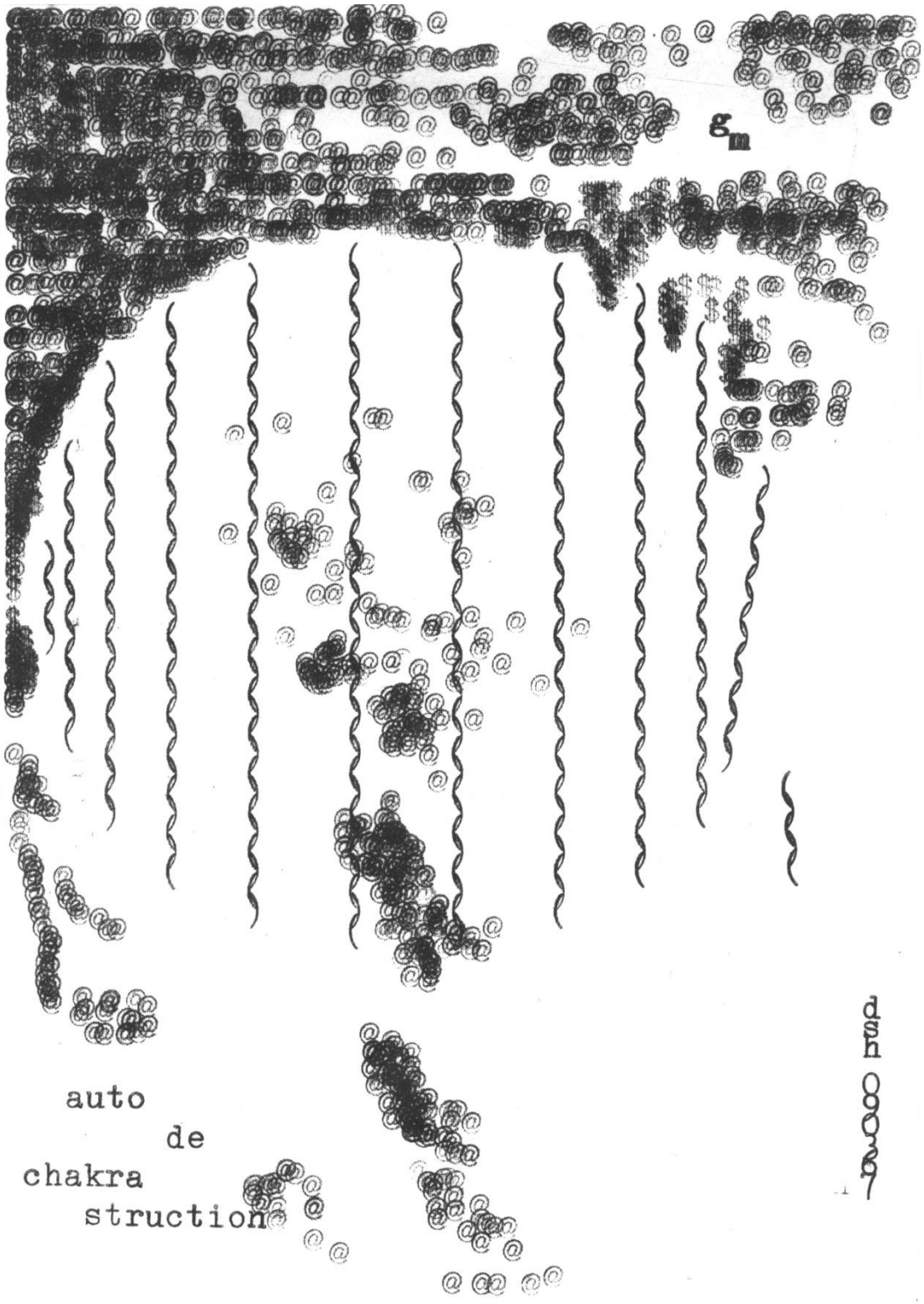



Fig. 9. “Auto-de-chakra-struction”.

*Tantric Poems Perhaps* was published in May 1967 by Cobbing's Writers Forum, the second in its folder series. The collection exhibits greater technical skill than the *Book of Chakras*, its shapes and patterns more complex, three-dimensional spaces articulated more precisely. It remains concerned with Tantric process, particularly with a quality of Tantric ritual identified by a phrase in Houédard's preface, from which the collection's title is sourced: "not zen but tantric poems perhaps". His "Apophatic Art" lecture distinguishes "zen and tantra" as "the sudden and slow schools of satori", suggesting an emphasis on gradual rather than sudden unravelling of self, borne out in the preponderance of sequences of shapes over single images in this collection. It is also unusual in containing poems granted precise symbolic associations by their semantic annotations.

Taking these points in turn, many of the poems contain sets of vertically ascending, interlocking forms, notably a simple piece composed March 20, 1967 ("200367") showing a rising column of flat rectangles with a kink or gyration halfway up implied by a leftwards shift of the conjoined dashes forming it. Another ("070267"; fig. 10) shows a single, circular shaft passing up and leftwards through three square bolts or screw-threads, the left bolt differently oriented in its implied space to the cylinder passing through it, suggesting some slippage of subjective perception.

In another poem ("020467"; fig. 11), the implied movement is reversed: waterfalls of brackets rush downwards over three flat planes outlined in dashes. In all cases, use of reiterative forms cultivates a sense of sequential spiritual progress.

Two of the typestracts are removed from the realms of visual abstraction by linguistic tags which convert them into diagrams of traditional "yantric" creative schemas. A piece from January 1, 1967 becomes a map of "The Five Buddhas and the Womb of the Tathagatas" (fig. 12): four transparent, three-dimensional cubes of dashes, connected by a fifth whose front meets their inner back corners – "five buddhas" – to a central rectangular prism formed from three cubes set side by side. Beyond this central "womb" of "tathāgata" – a first person pronoun used by Buddha in early scriptures – the pattern is repeated in reverse, another intermediary cube connecting to four outer ones. The typestract is in fact a three-dimensional, reversible reworking of two traditional kinds of Buddhist yantra, one of which depicts the Five Dhyani Buddhas: five manifestations of Buddha embodying different states to be attained during sādhana.

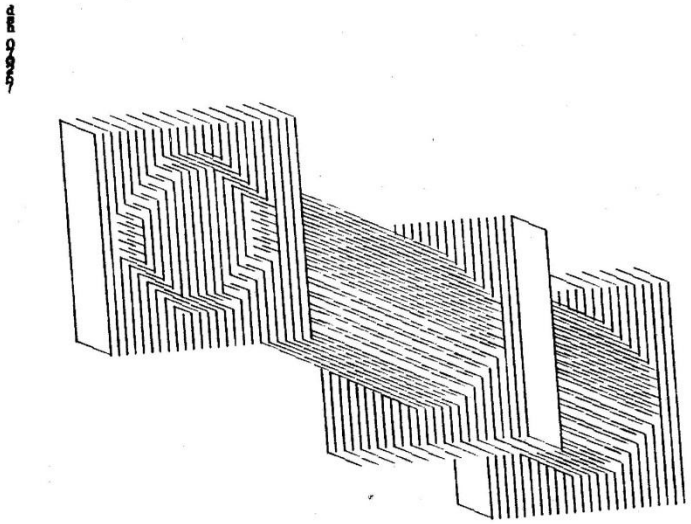


Fig. 10. “070267”.

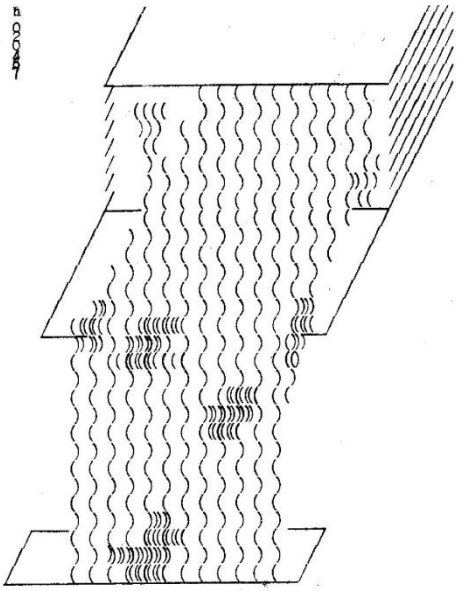


Fig. 11. “020467”.

accomplishment and spiritual beauty. The fifth (Vairocana), placed at the yantra's centre, shows Buddha in an ineffable, foundational state, a centrality Houédard enhances by pushing his fifth buddha-cube further inwards. The tripartite womb occupying the space beyond – the typestract's implied centre – evokes a yantric theme from Mahāyāna Buddhism: the Trikāya or three bodies of Buddha, which also represent different qualities: bliss, physical presence, and another germinal state from which the others emanate (Dharmakāya). The womb's central segment probably corresponds to this final form, connected to the similar Vairocana cubes on either side.

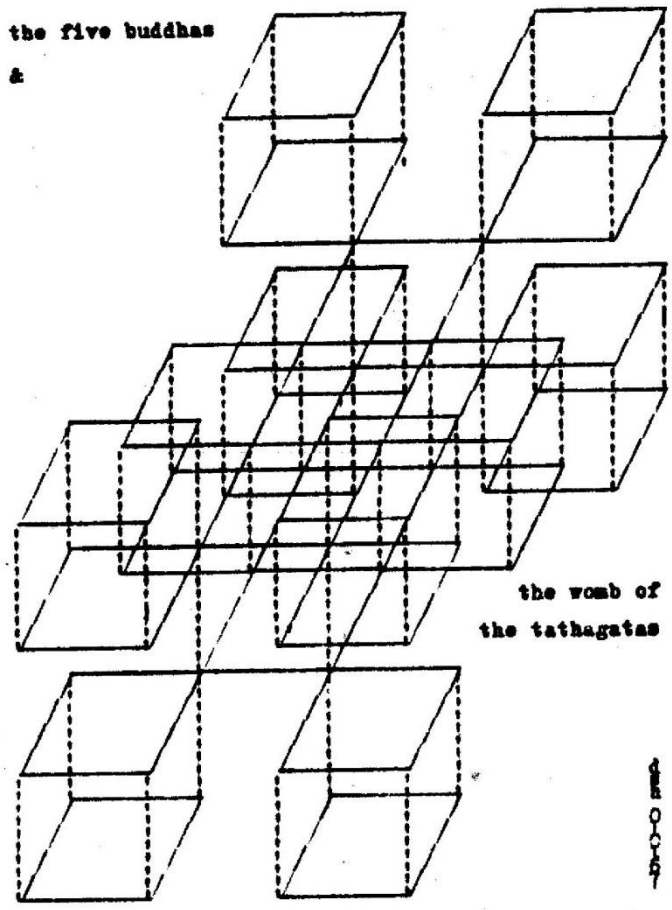



Fig. 12. "The Five Buddhas and the Womb of the Tathagatas".

Another typestract, composed January 26 1967, is a "Visualisation of Idapingala Staircases with Mount Meru up the Middle" (fig. 13). In yoga, "ida" and "pingala" are two of the nadīs in the subtle body, spiralling from left and right-hand positions respectively around a central spinal nadī, the "suṣumna". Houédard represents these nadīs as three spiralling columns of plateaus or steps, picked out in dashes. All the nadīs

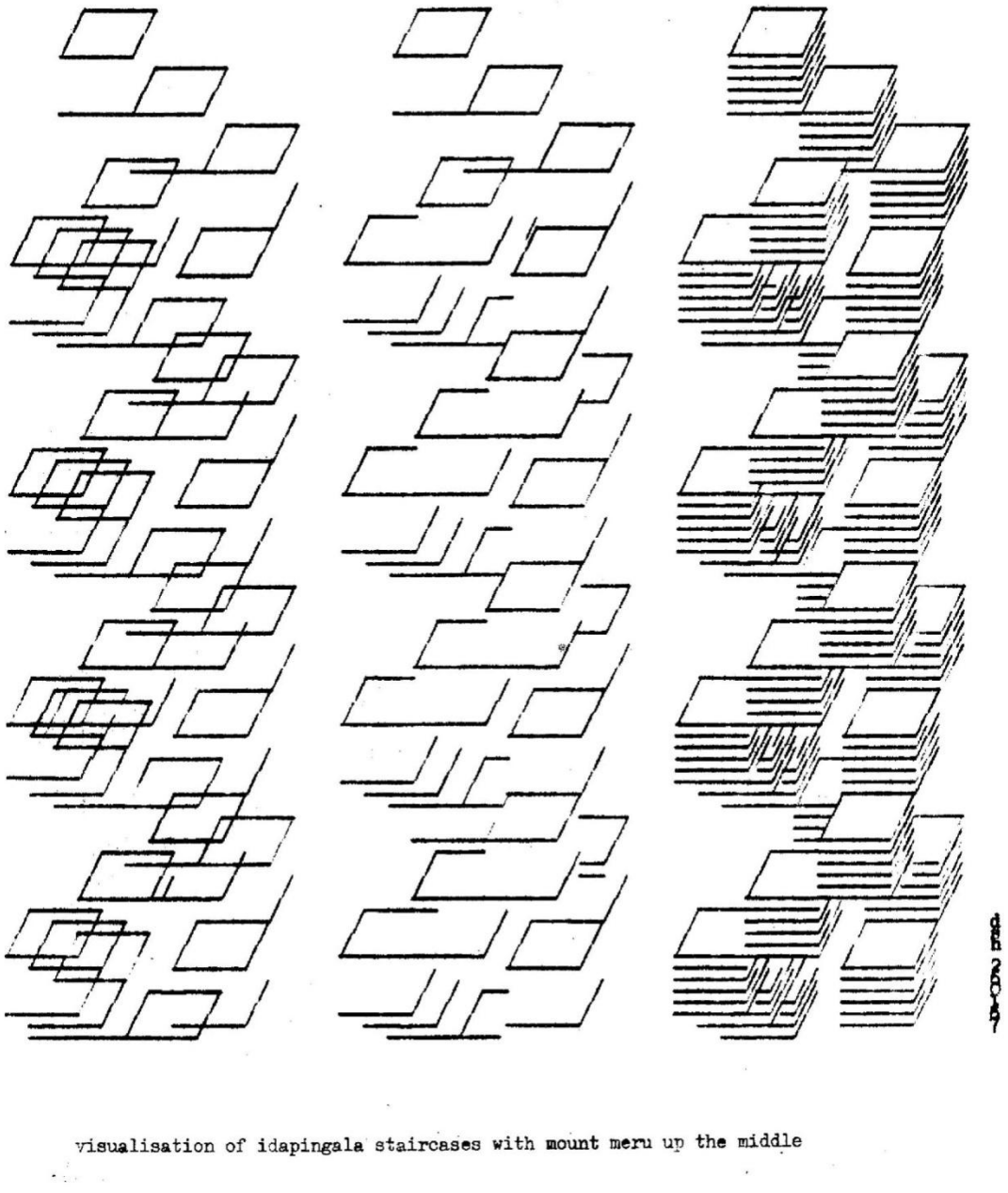



Fig. 13. "Visualisation of Idapingala Staircases with Mount Meru up the Middle".

have associative qualities and locations, ida connected to femininity, the moon and the Ganges, pingala to masculinity, the sun and the Yamuna river: for which reason, perhaps, Houédard's right "staircase" is constructed of thicker, clearer layers. The suṣumna occupies the spinal position: the central axis of the body, associated in Tantric scholarship with the central axis of the earth, occupied by Mount Meru in Tanzania, hence Houédard's titular reference. In both cases, annotation specifies both the form of ritual depicted, and the function of each visual gesture; these linguistic tags thus comprise an important inflection of the typestracts' compositional grammar.

Houédard continued to compose typestracts prolifically after 1967, achieving a consummate technical precision in the early 1970s. His next collection, *Like Contemplation,* appeared in February 1972, another Writers Forum Folder. This collection lacks the semantic references anchoring previous collections in specific models of contemplation, reflecting the broader emphasis on contemplation as such – preceding particular terminologies or traditions – reflected in its title. Nonetheless, it still displays a predisposition to particular shapes and forms. The cover-typestract, and three of the pieces inside, feature aligned sequences or agglomerations of cubes or plateaus, again suggesting sequences, steps or enclaves of contemplation: notably the untitled, undated cube-based poem below (fig. 14). Two other untitled, undated pieces depict sets of aligned screens suspended in a three-dimensional vacuum, in horizontal or vertical formations, decreasing in size from one end to the other (see fig. 15). This motif is enriched by engagement with Houédard's prior criticism and poetry, in which screens serve as Je/Moi barrier, the prakṛiti or ground of subjective reality and, by inference of a connection to Platonist or idealist metaphysics, reality as a projection of shadows. The incremental shrinkage of these screens, minimal gesture though it is, thus seems to indicate a burgeoning state of consciousness coextensive with the dissolution of self.

Before leaving the typestracts behind, it is worth acknowledging that their allusions to oriental theology, and phantasmic visual designs, might retrospectively seem indicative of a slightly trite kind of counter-cultural idiom. However, the deep emotional and intellectual engagement with that theology which they represent, and the evident skill of their craftsmanship, should shield them to a large extent from this criticism.

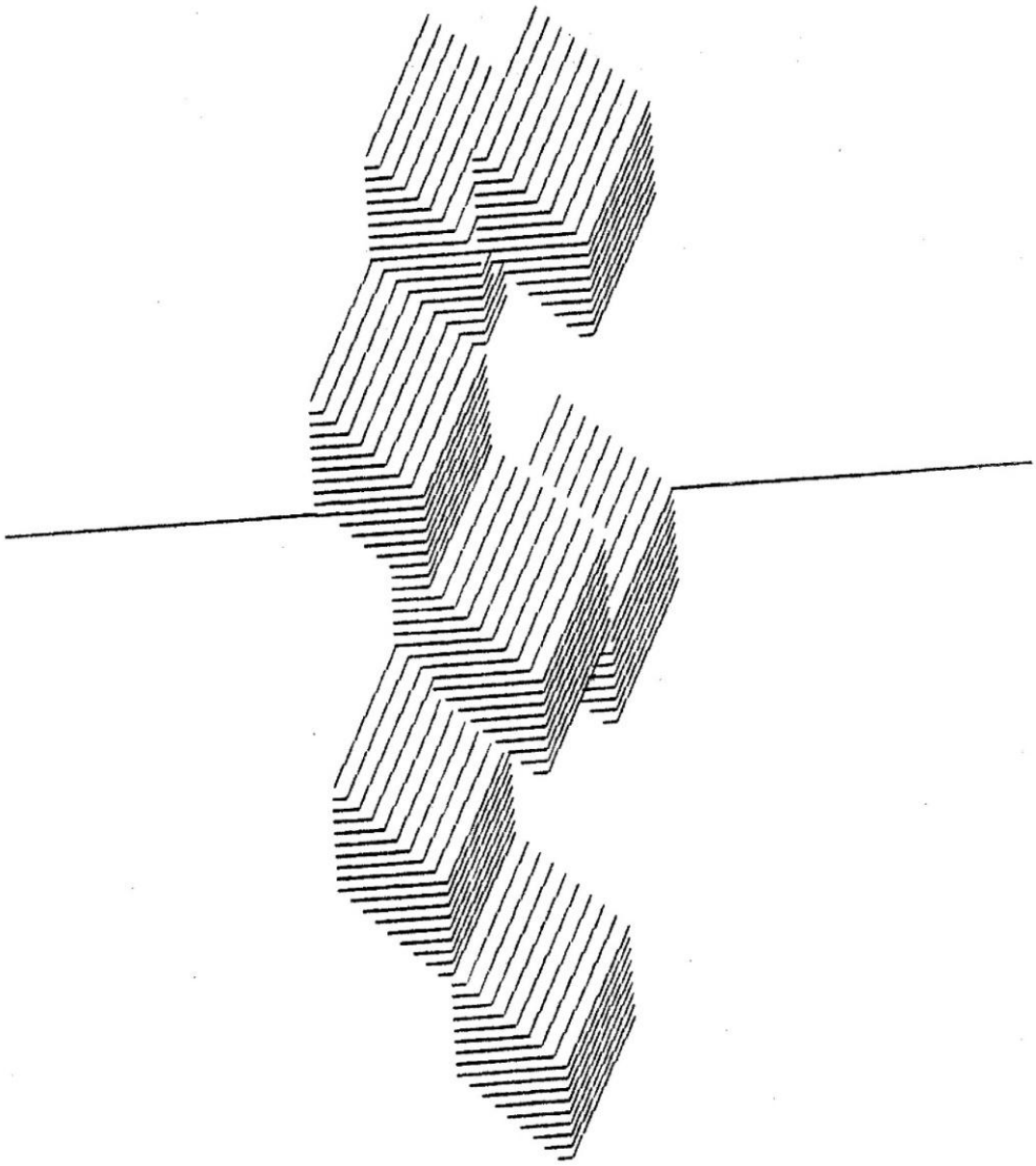


Fig. 14. Cube typestract.

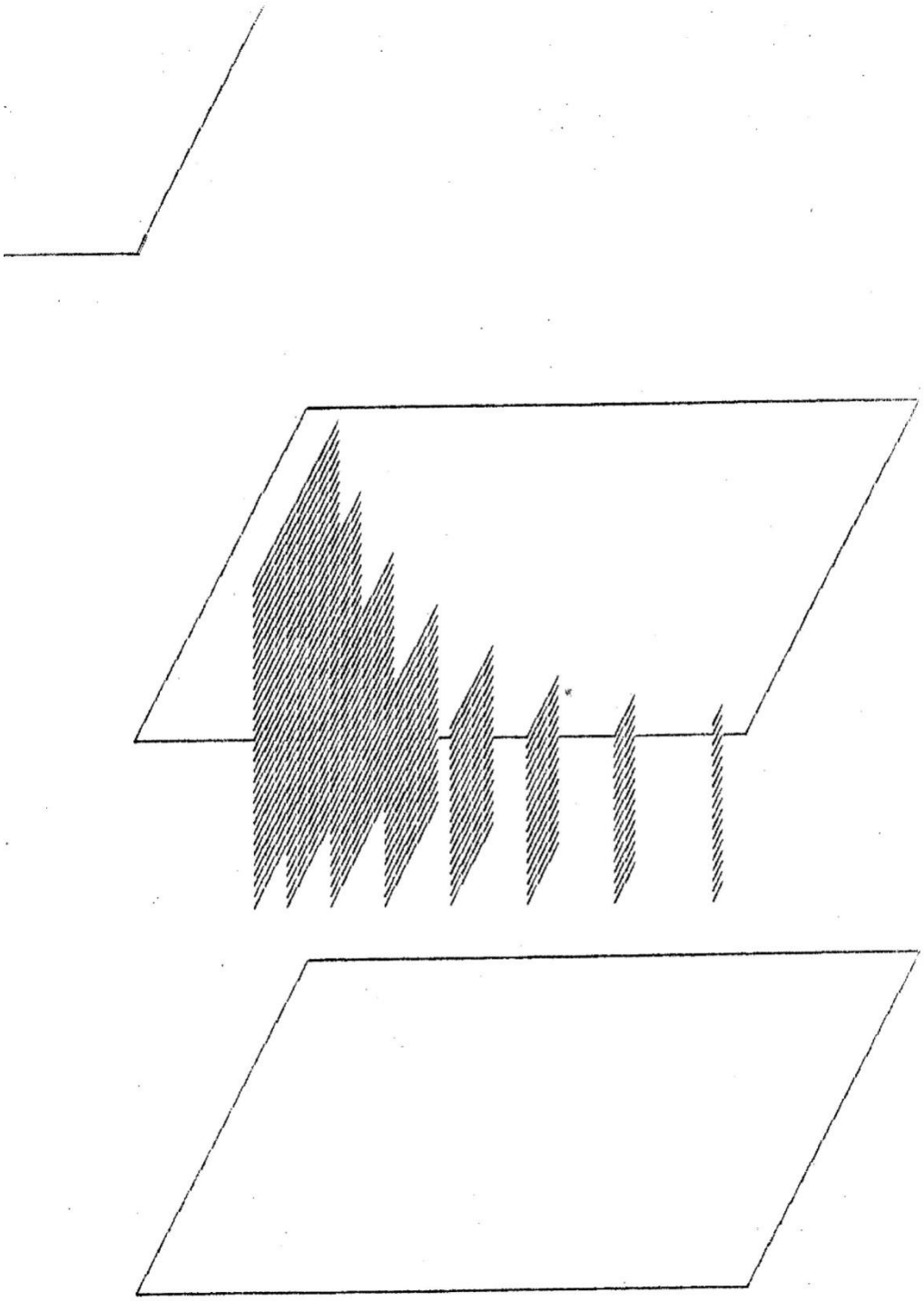


Fig. 15. Screen typestract.

Transparent and Reversible Poems: 1967-75

Around spring 1967, Houédard entered another stage of creative development, involving the use of transparent sheets of plastic as writing surfaces. His first works in this area used pairs of sheets to envelop written messages and/or fragments of found text, image or material, creating "transparent poems" legible and visible from several angles, whose meaning were shifted by the alteration of perspective. In the early 1970s, he extended the scope of these experiments by developing a customised alphabet whose letters could be read as other letters, or as themselves, when flipped or rotated at certain angles. With this alphabet he created "reversible poems" on single transparent sheets, from which two, occasionally three, semantic messages could be drawn. In foregrounding language's visual materiality, and highlighting the non-identity of sign and object by creating language-forms with more than one referent, these poems exemplify the use of concrete poetic principles to undermine rather than stabilise semantics. The splitting or slippage of meaning which they evoke is formally rooted in Houédard's sense of the alienation of inner and outer mind, the condition which his first reversible, *Dues/Snap* (1968), neatly evokes. But generally, they are not bound to that topic. This section assesses some of Houédard's unpublished transparent poems – many of which were exhibited – and his reversible poems, eleven of which were printed in *Begin Again: A Book of Reflections and Reversals* (1975).[23]

Houédard's transparent poems were probably first shown at the festival Poem—Image—Symbol in Falmouth in June 1967, and at a festival organised by Chopin in Modena shortly afterwards. A letter to David Medalla (July 10, 1967) printed in *12 Dancepoems from the Cosmic Typewriter* (1969) – a set of translations of Nahuatl "poems" from Houédard's score for *The Cosmic Typewriter*, a "ballet" composed for Medalla's Exploding Galaxy dance troupe – describes early explorations with the form: "i did some freaky glasspage poems for phalmouth - & just got done big glasspage-poster poem for chopins posterpoem expo in Modena … you can read different texts from each side – bAn om – reads monad" ([4]).

Three common formal features are attributable to these "glasspage" poems. Many, like the one Houédard quotes here, prefigure the reversibles by exploiting the latin alphabet's inherent possibilities for rotation – in this case horizontal – to create single lines of text from which two messages could be read; the "Sixteen Visual Tantra

Poems" in *Broadsheet* 6 (1968) use similar techniques. Others, making more use of their enveloping surfaces, contain substances such as paint, powder or grain; Houédard suggests that such pieces could feature in the ballet's set design: "large glasspage panels with bits of cosmic antistuff inbetween" (ibid.). A third technique, posited by Everitt, involved cutting up "a passage of newsprint in such a way that a new sense was 'found' beneath the surface of the ostensible meaning", the text (or image) then positioned within the transparent envelope (35). This technique made use of both the bifurcated surface and the reversal process, sections of print often mounted on paper or blobs of acrylic in such a way that they were only visible from one side.

Two poems sent to the Themersons, now stored with the Houédard material in the Themersons Archive, exemplify the first two techniques: phrases legible from several angles, set between rigid sheets of transparent plastic, are surrounded by scattered grain or spice. An accompanying letter (August 3, 1967) presents them as "transparieties", "one with sago (i think) antimatterpudding & one with nutmeg ... part of the cuisine series". One of these "cuisine" poems reads (from the angle suggested by Houédard"s signature) "poodwobniw/ piqniqbook/ booqmollid/ millompood". The meaning of this seemingly nonsensical phrase is resolved by shifting the poem into all four reading positions afforded by reversal and 180 degree rotation, and by reading *q* as *c* or *k*. Moving through them in turn, we (eventually) read "picnicbook/ pillowbook/ willowbook/ windowbook". This lyrical little verse might allude to the comforting presence of the bible or other spiritual texts. Yellow pools of ground nutmeg are fixed in place all around, "cosmic antistuff" which generates alternative associations of the ritual inversion or transcendence of reality, as if hallucinogenic substances or scattered offerings left over from some magical or sacrificial rite. One allusion may be to tantric "puja", in which brightly coloured substances, often emblematic of bodily fluids, are strewn across statues or icons. The puffed grains of wheat sealed into the second poem, which Houédard describes as pearls of "sago", a starchy substance extracted from plants in India and Southeast Asia, create a similar atmosphere; Houédard implies these grains to have some ritual use, perhaps as a drug or "antimatterpudding".

The two transparent poems stored with Edwin Morgan's Glasgow archive, also sent with letters, make more use of the collage technique referred to above. One piece, composed September 9, 1967, contains snippets of newspaper text mounted on silver


Fig. 16. “picnicbook”.

foil squares, enclosed in a cascading line between two sheets of corrugated, translucent green plastic. Other text strips are pasted on the squares' reverse sides, so the two sides reveal different messages. The first reads:

Mau em
THE LOVE A
R LAUGHTER
PROMENADE C
the post-Mao e
Kiss of L
LL Noise
Advanced electronic e
The Revolt A
n Collecting
The Fastest D
its highest J
Sex O
Royal Albert H
Comfortable N

The second reads:

BLACK P
Conceptual A
the wave of p
waters away w
MANUAL O
The Week-end R
t decade
camping h
9 SEP 1967
The economic d
SUMMER S
IRON H

Prefixing isolated letters with adjectives – "electronic", "comfortable", "conceptual" – suggests the same scrutiny of language as an object as Cobbing's *Cygnet Ring* cut-ups, while phemeral allusions to contemporary political and cultural events – "post-Mao e", "The Revolt A", "Royal Albert H" – evoke Burroughs's *Minutes to Go* contributions (1960). More generally, the extraction of ulterior messages from newsprint vaguely suggests some critical reorientation around conventional social discourse, complementing the poem's animating principle of reversal. This might seem the extent

of its meaning, but reading the isolated letters downwards also reveals a mesostic, documenting a meeting of friends – "Marcel[l]le and John, Papworth" –, the last four lines serving as a signature: "9 SEPT 1967 dsh".

Besides the possibilities yielded by their customised script, Houédard's reversible poems use two more angles of rotation – 90 degrees and 270 – making, together with page-flips, for eight possible reading positions, compelling a "search for the ideal poem that can be read 8 ways up", as Houédard noted (foreword [xiv]). His 1979 exhibition note credits the form's conception to his realisation of the Latin alphabet's inherent possibilities for reorientation: "continuation from d to p ... led to my first reversal deus-snap and to John Furnival's suggestion of looking at the six other reversal possibilities [e.g.] b to q; or c to n and N to Z ("Notes by the Artist"). Houédard's *Begin Again* foreword describes the Latin alphabet as unique in this capacity for "reversals & reflections - perhaps because its origin is in a flipover of its semitic parent":

> & yet tho all alphabets are siblings hebrew greek arabic & syriac defy all effort even tho greek letters once faced either way indifferently & it should be possible to do something with the cufic forms that contributed such stunning geometries to the high phase of arab calligraphy - chinese characters also seem impossible….([xiii])

To a large extent, Houédard's inspiration was thus his alphabet, although that 1979 note also notes an influence from "the kinetic transformations of machine-poetry" ("Notes by the Artist"), while his foreword cites the elementary typefaces of constructivism and modernism: "letters found their bliss after the bauhaus & gill in the u that cld be happy as n - the w that doubled for m" ([xiv]).

*Begin Again* was published by the artist Li Yuan-Chia's LYC Press: eleven poems, lithographed from hand drawn originals onto loose transparent sheets, held in double-layered pages with open tops which function as envelopes, out of which the poems must be pulled to be read. Its publication coincided with an exhibition in which an astonishing 250 reversibles were shown, now stored with Houédard's Manchester papers. Thematically speaking, the moment of reversal or rotation itself often becomes the object of aesthetic focus in these poems, as Houédard noted: "[s]ome discoveries like R to S and S to D, continue to afford even deeper pleasure than poems in which they are used….[W]hat is presented is never quite the object of the words but the *feel* of

the moment when MIND e.g. transforms to ACHE or RIOT to SHOT" ("Notes by the Artist"). Stefan Themerson's introduction to *Begin Again* claims a broad philosophical value for this moment of reversal, in exposing the disparity between signs and their objects, by revealing signs to have multiple values: the reversibles' most significant quality, Themerson asserts, is that "[t]hey are not palindromes…A palindromic trickster tries to confirm the law of identity, - dom Sylvester succeeds in questioning it. What is thought to be one and the same thing, he transfers from a set of co-ordinates to another set of co-ordinates and hey presto! dieu becomes big-U" ("Dom Sylvester Houédard" x). However, as Houédard also noted, this effect "is enhanced when the feel is supported … by a semantic balance" ("Notes by the Artist"). This "semantic balance" – the two messages' relevance to each other – leads the reversibles into thematic realms ranging, as Houédard stated, across the "sacred secular lyric erotic didactic (tho hardly epic) funny & metaphysical" (foreword [xv]). Some of them seem concerned with the value or nature of reversal or reflection itself; others evoke meditation or prayer; others are polemical, or homoerotic. These four categories underpin the following analysis.

"Yes/Nay" best exemplifies Themerson's anti-palindromic principle: a single graphic made to refer to diametrically opposed concepts via a flip round the page's top right corner, what Houédard calls "an axis of the heraldic bend" (foreword [xv]). A grapheme that serves as both *a* and *e*, an *s* that rotates into *N*, and a *y* that reads identically from two angles are vital to the effect. The collection's title-poem, by contrast (fig. 17), ruminates on the process of reflection itself: by various typographic manipulations, the words "b/e/G/i/n/" and "a/g/a/i/n", stretching down either side of the page, assume each others' roles upon a horizontal flip, the ascender of *b* dipped over so as to form an *a* when spun around. The preservation of one message across the reorientation process fits the evocation of an endless, changeless cycle.

Other poems seem broadly concerned with prayer or meditation. "Dieu: Big-U" most successfully attaches to the form the indication of inner mind's perennial lapse into outer which makes all images of God "images of me". Flipping the page horizontally transforms the perpendicular letters from "d/I/e/U" into "b/I/g/U". Others express the trials of the ego in isolation from God, most simply and effectively a piece employing a 90 degree anti-clockwise shift, a reversible reading order and some stretched letter-shapes to transform "m/I/n/D" into "A/C/H/E". The serifs of *D* and *I*, extruded outwards, become the stems of *A* and *H*.

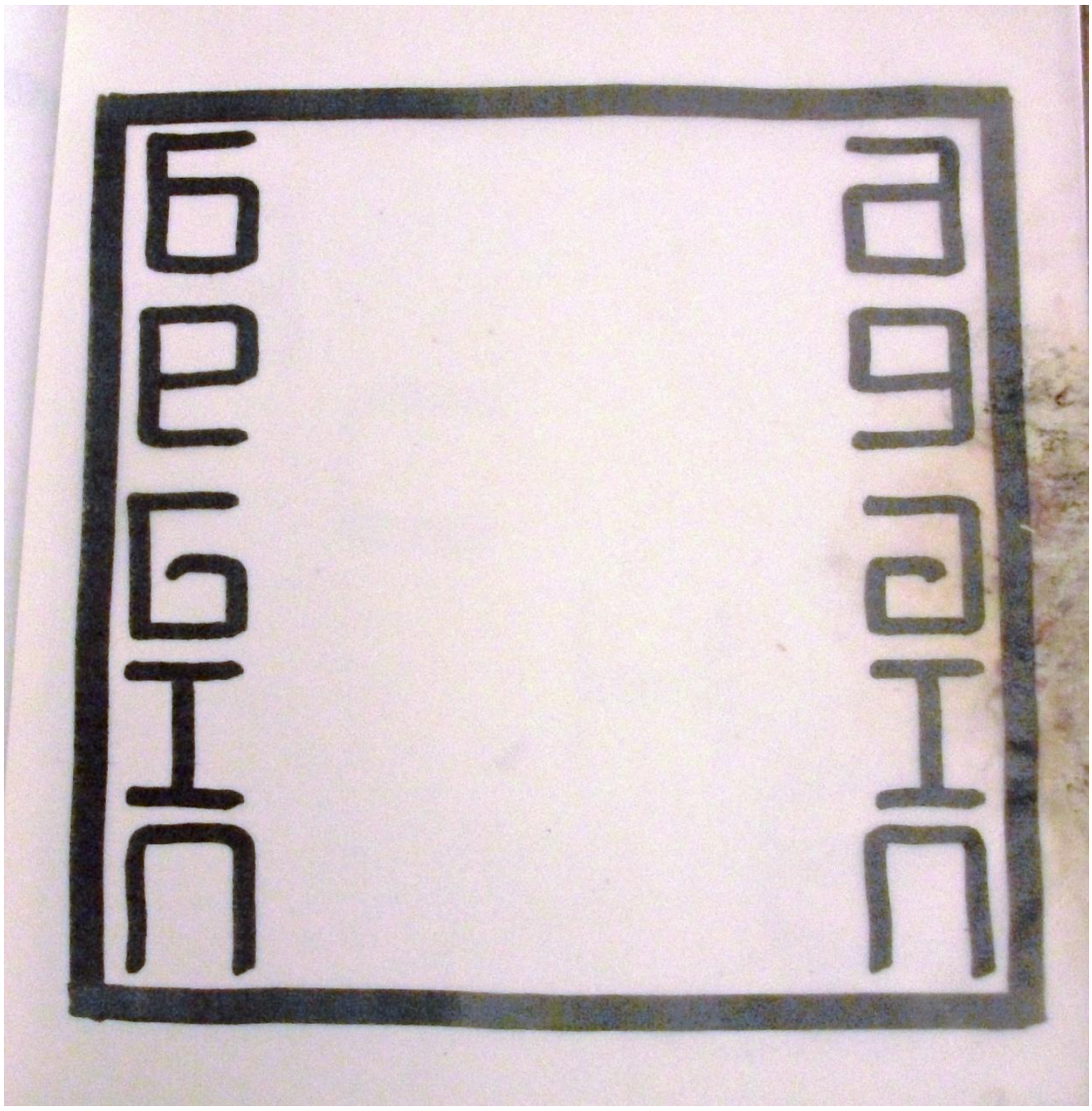
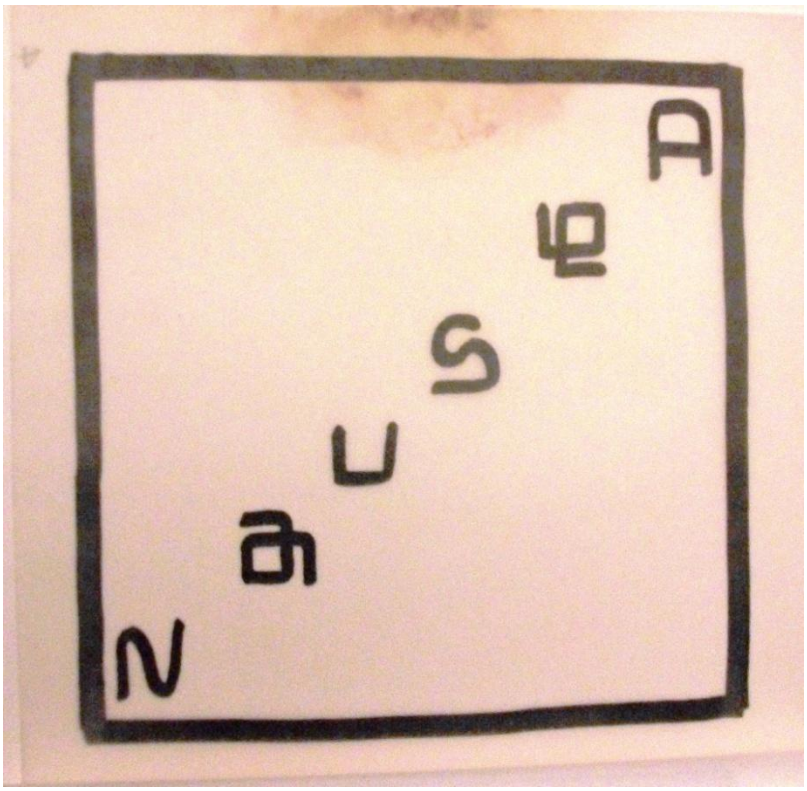


Fig. 17. “Begin Again”.

Another poem, flipped around the page’s top left corner – “a bend sinister” (foreword [xv]) – creates the phrase “Sacred Nausea” (fig.18), suggesting “zen sickness”: a frustrated yearning for the transcendent. Among various typographic idiosyncrasies, Houédard’s *a/e* grapheme is again vital. “Gaze at Ease”, by contrast, suggests the overcoming of this sickness, evoking a state of peaceful meditative awareness; although there is also clearly a double entendre at work. Again, retaining one message across the reversal process complements the message of wholeness or unity.



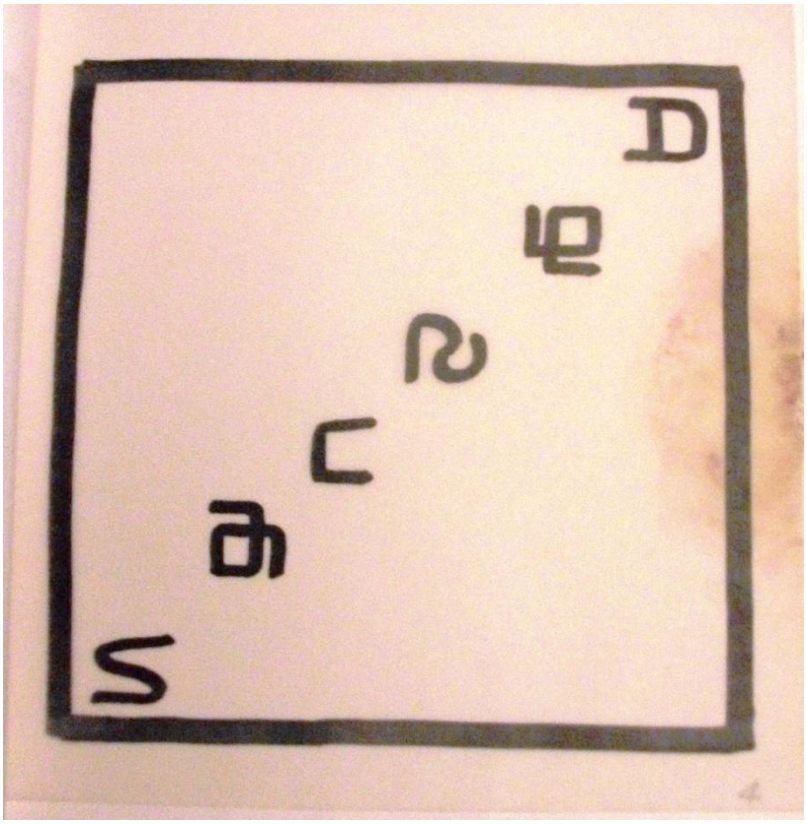




Fig. 18. “Sacred Nausea”.

Some of the *Begin Again* reversibles reflect politically investments. "Vins: Bons à Boire – Bourgeoise Ruin" deploys a virtuosic upside-down flip to suggest a broad condemnation of western capitalist excess, a sentiment framed by the endorsement of communism, especially Maoism, evident in various exhibition pieces: *Plane Bombs Led Ones Cower/Brave Power Red Overcomes* (an embroidered version of this piece contains the annotation "Mao overcomes a KMT attack"); *Leg Toil/Red Riot* (another embroidered version contextualises this phrase: "the long march 1934-36"); *East Free/West Fray*; *Mine is the Better Mind/Right Wing be Left Wing*. This engagement with contemporary politics is striking in Houédard's poetry – if not his criticism – although the reversible form's necessary semantic brevity somewhat trivialises the issues at stake.

The most disarming reversibles are those which are openly homoerotic in theme. In one poem, a "loNg sHaft", shifted 90 degrees, makes for a "rosy nIght" (fig. 19). In another, "Patrick William James Edward", two friends' names – "pat wil" – rotate 180 degrees into two others': "jim ted"; the poem is subtitled "Ménage à Quatre". These pieces are bawdily comic, exploiting the fact that all reversibles are, at one level, double entendres. But the fact that these two poems open the collection shows the reversibles' significance as a means of sexual self-affirmation for Houédard, whose monastic and sexual predilections were clearly at odds. This theme was also very much to the fore in the exhibition, which featured such salacious constructions as "Joy Hole", "Poof Food", "5,607,709 Bolloqs", "Revised End/Buggerings", "Fresh Arsed" and "So Pretty/ Ah Hard On". These lewdly comic poems seem to bespeak Houédard's Tantra-inflected sense of the "circuminsession of god and sex" ("Beat and Afterbeat" 142).

The use of visual device in *Begin Again* to undermine rather than enhance the myth of semantic objectivity makes it a fitting subject upon which to close this account of Houédard's work, formally distinguished as it is from concrete poetry's original tenets by that impulse towards linguistic effacement. However, in conclusion, it also seems worth distinguishing Houédard's work, by both motives and formal traits, from much of the non-linguistic concrete poetry which came to embody that same principle by the late 1960s, despite his poetry's often archetypally "sixties" tone and themes. A great deal of that work, that is, can be assessed by recourse to Higgins's conception of intermedia: a spontaneous melding of artistic registers by which an expressive space beyond their shared confines would be accessed. Houédard's "coexistentialist" grammar ultimately emphasises the impossibility of escaping the constraining mechanisms of medium,

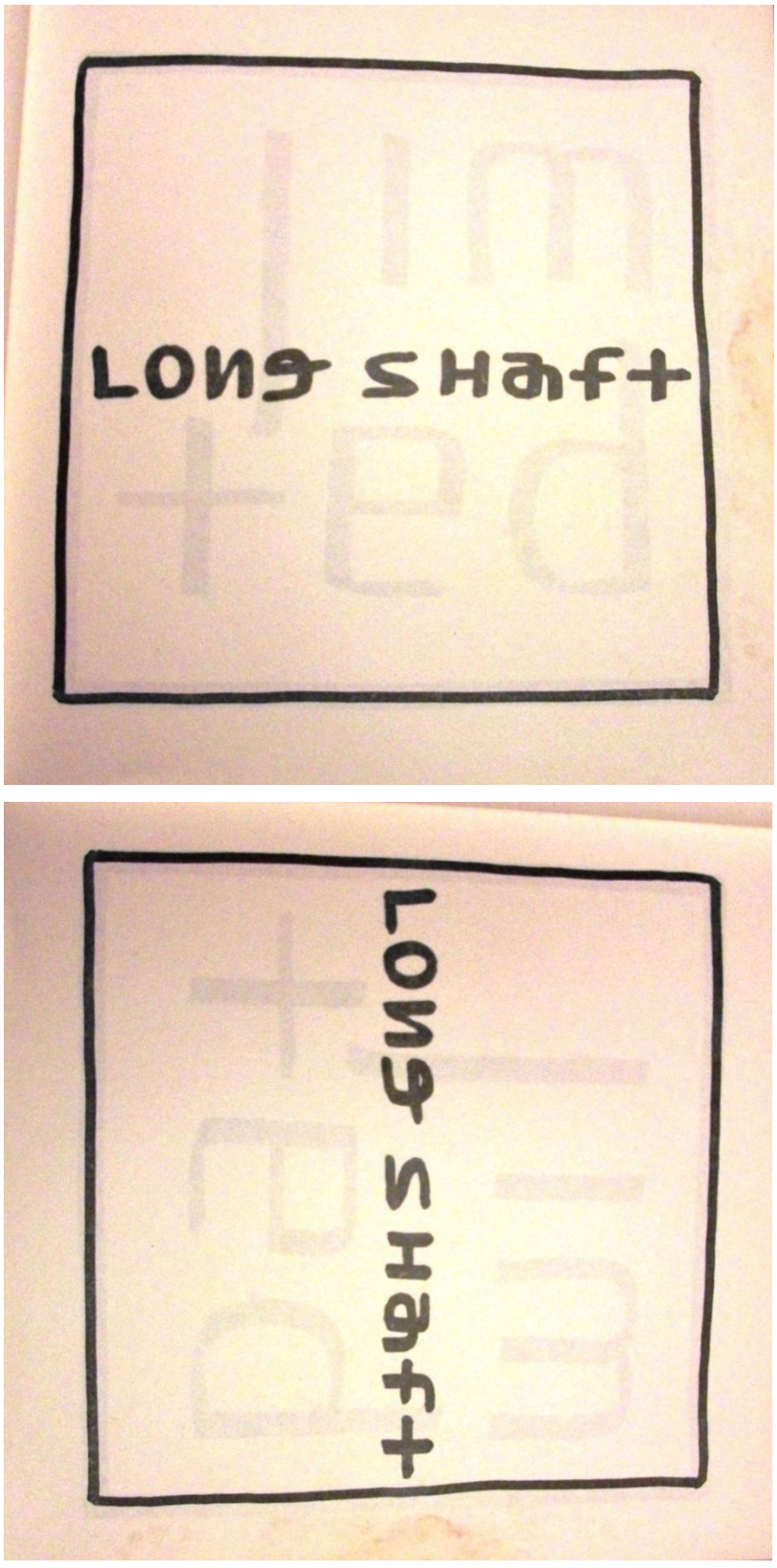



Fig. 19. “Long Shaft Rosy Night”.

framing the space beyond solely as a gap or blank. Arguably, this ironically testifies to his more self-aware belief in a realm of transcendent, immediate experience, towards which he directed his poetry, and which was recognised as an essentially spiritual vision, inaccessible to the spatiotemporally trammelled subject. The ascetic, self-corrective impulse this generated explains the formal distinction between Houédard's meticulous typewriter constructions, wrought, as Bann's obituary noted, with "all the discipline of a medieval monastic copyist" ("Dom Sylvester Houédard"), and the more spontaneous expressive register of Bob Cobbing.

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[1] Houédard's essay "D-r-a-w-n-I-n-w-a-r-d" (1982), concerning the teaching of St. Benedict, describes inner mind not as part of God, but as the aspect of creation most like him:

> [A]s visible creation reveals invisible creator, it is his image in the same way that every poem is the image of the poet speaking in the poem, and is our only means of access to him as poet. Of all the images of God that make up the universe the human being is inevitably the one we are going to find most like him, and the human image available to our closest scrutiny is ourself. (142-43)

This distinction indicates the non-authoritative nature of the above account.

[2] This "paradox of whether we can say it is God's being or ours" is often evoked by Houédard through images of romantic union: "[a]s mere possibility mind is virgin. In its fruitful union with God mind is wife" (*Commentaries* 19). Similar metaphors permeate the poetry of St. Teresa of Àvila and St. John of the Cross.

[3] Houédard's translations are discussed in Alaric Sumner's "Obituaries for the Living: Celebrating, Forgetting, Writing Off and Killing Off: Carlyle Reedy and dsh" (1999). Three event scores are reprinted in *Notes from the Cosmic Typewriter*.

[4] Given that Houédard only discovered Ginsberg's work a year after composing this poem, its beat-like grammatical traits might reflect the later date – 1962 or after – when this version was written.

[5] Houédard seemed especially drawn to Kerouac as a fellow "bilingual catholic", of French heritage (ibid.).

[6] Untitled poems are entered in the works cited list according to their first lines.

[7] The work in Furnival's exhibition in fact related primarily to pop art, Furnival having studied at the Royal College of Art from 1957-60 alongside David Hockney when the genre was flourishing. However, it used transcribed snippets of weather forecast in a manner which Furnival describes as "almost concrete" in its grammatical repetition and reduction (personal interview).

[8] It is reproduced in *Notes from the Cosmic Typewriter* as "Me/You/Us/Yes/No".

[9] Untitled typestracts and other non-semantic poems are entered in the works cited list according to a recurring letter or number, or by accompanying dates or phrases, such as "020663".

[10] See the references in "Beat and Afterbeat", "EX/CON/CRETE" (1970), and

"Chronobiograpy/Autozoography".

[11] The booklet's other dedicatee is the Viennese poet Konrad Bayer, who had recently committed suicide.

[12] This aspect of concrete poetry's prehistory is stressed in Berjouhi Bowler's 1970 anthology *The Word as Image*.

[13] 'D-r-a-w-n-I-n-w-a-r-d' contains a fuller genealogy of Benedictine theologists.

[14] According to Houédard, *Rock Sand Tide* was published in 1964 ("Publications" 22). However, its composition date is December 26, 1964, and as it was produced in a run of handmade lino prints, the necessary production speed seems questionable.

[15] Murphy connects Houédard's interest in Christianity's Babylonian origins to his time in Asia with military intelligence: "his connections within the various strands of what was remaining of Zoroastrianism were quite significant when it came to his work on the *Jerusalem Bible*" (personal interview). Houédard's input was probably vital to the critical historical approach for which the *Jerusalem Bible* became famous. A footnote to this psalm seems to reflect his influence: "the psalmist, speaking of the sun as a creature of God, uses expressions found also in Babylonian mythology" (Ps. 19.5).

[16] Houédard formed amorous attachments to some of these visitors. The poems "Ancora Gregorio" and "Fresh Paint", published in the *Aylesford Review* alongside "Beat and Afterbeat", are essentially love poems to Gregory Corso, a one-time visitor to Prinknash (127). This information is relevant because, as Murphy states, at some point in the late-1960s Houédard's abbot imposed vows of silence and isolation on him in reaction to these attachments (personal interview). As Furnival states, this increasingly isolated him from the Gloucestershire scene, which somewhat disintegrated without his tireless brokering of creative relationships: "eventually, Silvester seems to have been reined in by the Abbey, who originally allowed him quite a lot of freedom, and we gradually saw less and less of him" (letter to the author, January 24, 2011).

[17] *Babacus* was among the exhibited poems thrown into a river by drunken students at the Second International Concrete Poetry Exhibition organised by Charles Cameron at St. Catherine's College Oxford in June 1965. It was repaired, sold to the Parisian mathematician J.C. Moineau, and later photographed for Jean-François Bory's 1968 concrete anthology *Once Again* (Furnival, personal interview).

[18] Bill Allen displayed *Mind-Trip* at the launch of Simpson's *Notes from the Cosmic Typewriter,* December 2012.

[19] Many of Houédard's best typestracts were never published, those that were often in black and white (on Cobbing's mimeograph machine), belying Houédard's striking use of his typewriter's colour ribbons. The Sackner Archive in Florida contains many unpublished typestracts more striking in form and colour than those assessed below. Many were privately circulated, others exhibited; some are reproduced by Simpson. However, focusing on published work anchors analysis in poems which Houédard selected and arranged, more likely to display recurring themes and motifs.

[20] Murphy suggests that Houédard's role in India might have influenced the typestracts' suggestion of encoded linguistic meaning: "the typescripts I suspect had an awful lot to do with his work in British Intelligence and cryptography" (personal interview).

[21] It is unclear whether Houédard knew of the tiksels when he began composing the typestracts. He would probably have read articles such as Herbert Spencer's "H.N. Werkman, Printer-Painter" in *Typographica* 11 (1955) and Reichardt's "H.N. Werkman: Printer, Painter, Poet" in *The Penrose Annual* 57 (1964), but these only cover the better-known druksels. His "Between Poetry and Painting: Chronology" mentions Werkman

but only refers to the druksels: "1923 Werkman begins his 600 druksels" (11).

[22] In the transcript quoted here, stored with the Sackner Archive of Concrete and Visual Poetry, *n* is replaced with *9*; speaking at the launch of Simpson's *Notes from the Cosmic Typewriter*, December 2 2012, Marvin Sackner suggested that this was an apophatic pun, a homophone for the German "nein".

[23] Some transparent and reversible poems are reproduced in *Notes from the Cosmic Typewriter*.

Abstract Concrete: Bob Cobbing

Bob Cobbing published *Sound Poems*, the first work of his which I refer to as "concrete poetry", in January 1965. This relatively late date reflects his limited association with the original concrete movement, although his closeness to poets involved with its UK reception, most significantly Houédard, arguably entailed an indirect affiliation. However, Cobbing's engagement with the concrete movement largely involved redrawing its boundaries to encompass a vast range of poetic milieus, from historical pattern poets to the French sound poets who influenced that 1965 collection. As this implies, Cobbing's version of "concrete poetry" is the least easy of those considered to assess by recourse to classical style. Indeed the term should not be applied to his work at all without acknowledging the new sense which he grants it: bearing this in mind, two primary characteristics can be identified.

Firstly, whereas classical concrete poets emphasised language's material aspects to enhance or methodically nuance semantic sense, Cobbing, like Houédard, often foregrounded those material aspects at the expense of semantic sense. Houédard tended to replace semantic sense with abstract visual composition; Cobbing, by contrast, often broke language down into its constitutive visual and sonic elements, an explosion or atomisation granting much of that work a chaotic, maximalist quality antithetical to Gomringer's pristine constellations. His development of a performed, sonic variant of concrete was vital in this respect, as improvised sound constructions tended to supplant the impression of semantic objectivity ascribable to the poem-as-object with a more self-evidently transient, non-definitive form.[1]

Secondly, this breakdown of linguistic signs was simultaneously the means of constructing a new poetic grammar, of abstract visual and sonic effects.[2] Poetry on Cobbing's terms should not therefore be understood as a predominantly linguistic medium, but one moving freely through visual and sonic gesture: as well as bodily movement and dance, although for reasons of space, this aspect of his work is not considered. As Cobbing himself stated in 1985, "[a] fundamental mistake is to regard poetry as a branch of literature. It is not. It is best regarded as one of the performing arts" ("What the Tape-Recorder Teaches the Poet"). This poetry was intended to surpass the boundaries of mediation assumed to contain "language" – a word used throughout this chapter solely to denote semantic language – by renouncing referential

function, thereby presenting rather than representing the object of poetry: making it a material substance or phenomenon which could be directly, immediately experienced.

One aspect of Cobbing's poetics – rather than poetry – relevant to this motive was that, rather than seeing his work as fundamentally visual or sonic, or both, across the mid-to-late 1960s he increasingly saw it as something beyond the boundaries of any one medium: an "intermedium" in Higgins's sense. This reflected his sense that not only language, but even the division of expression into the sensory channels pertaining to different mediums – vision, audition – diverted that immediate experience of poetry's object. His 1969 statement on "The Shape and Size of Poetry" captured this sentiment when it had just fully flowered:

> Poetry has gone beyond the word, beyond the letter, both aurally and visually. Visual poetry can be heard, smelt, has colours, vibrations. Sound poetry dances, tastes, has shape....Poetry in these forms is closer to physical being, at least one step nearer to bodily movement. Gone is the word as word, though the word may still be used as sound or shape. Poetry now resides in other elements.

Not only is language surpassed by this model, but the sensory boundaries of other mediums, such as visual and sonic art, are flattened: sound has shape, vision can be heard. However, unlike language, sonic and visual effects could still be used, as in the hands of the concrete they could somehow surpass the boundaries of their own medium. Metaphors of physical movement – and smell! – reflect the attendant notion that by surpassing mediation, this poetry would become a *living thing*.

Before considering some ways of quantifying this mysterious asserted quality, the motives underlying its assertion should be considered. By surpassing mediation, Cobbing sought to bypass the inaccuracy and manipulation potentially attendant to the collective use of any sign system, particularly language; and to present his work in a universally intuitable manner. He shared this aim with the classicists, but whereas they sought to impart that power to language itself, Cobbing saw this as achievable only by renouncing language, or at least radically qualifying its value.

It is unclear whether Cobbing saw manipulation and inaccuracy as endemic in language as such, or as a characteristic of its use in twentieth-century social and political propaganda, to construct specious accounts of human nature buttressing certain socioeconomic hierarchies. He suggested the latter stance in a 1993 interview with

Daniela Conti, describing concrete poetry as a means of "protesting … about the misuse of language by politicians, priests, and so on, who seem … to be distorting language in order to take power over the people". However, earlier in the interview, Cobbing denied that concrete poetry was "engaged" or "didactic", a distinction probably not intended to deny its didacticism or engagement, but to distinguish it from engaged art-forms which employed the flawed medium of language, suggesting a more all-encompassing mistrust of it.

Whether language was intrinsically or contextually corrupted, by replacing it with an intermedial poetry, Cobbing sought to create a microcosm of human communication, and, indirectly, social organisation, shed of inaccuracy and manipulation: freed from the power structures perpetuated, even constructed, by language. Although he preferred not to outline the political ramifications of this, in a 1995 interview with Wolfgang Görtschacher, Cobbing stated: "my politics, if I had to express them in any other way than through my poetry, would be anarchist".

But if Cobbing's poetry was to imply any alternative model of social organisation to one based around semantics, some secessional form of communication would have to be inaugurated in its place. Cobbing located the potential for such a form in those sonic and visual effects already mentioned which, as an intermedial poesis, were taken to manifest an atemporal, universal human essence, which would cohere to the same essence in the interpreter at an essentially pre-rational level, cutting through the layers of partial reference which recuperated communication into mediated experience.

Clearly, this quantification of objective expression is different from that of classical poetics. Whereas classical concrete poets attempted to bypass subjectivity to render objective expression, Cobbing burrowed down into subjective expression to attempt to unearth its objective roots; this connoted a focus on spontaneity and instinct anathema to the classicists' methodical precision. It also led him into perhaps irksomely transcendentalist dimensions of ontology: through the supposition of some common, pre-rational state of human consciousness, and the assertion that certain kinds of sensory experience could awaken that state: the poet become seer or shaman.

Indeed, many critics have offered alternative accounts of this aspect of Cobbing's work, suggesting that rather than attempting to transcend mediation, its non-definitiveness exemplified the openness of signs to multiple interpretations, thereby espousing the spatiotemporal contingency of all meaning systems, semantic and

otherwise. This is one subtext of Lawrence Upton's assertion that "Cobbing never abandoned the word; never abandoned the linguistic; and denied his work was abstract" ("Bob Cobbing: and the Book as Medium; designs for poetry"). Similarly, cris cheek considers assessments of Cobbing's visual-sonic grammar employing clichéd spiritual terminology a kind of aberration, lamenting the lack of "theoretical grit on the slippage of some of the quasi-mystical cant around vocal performance and interpretations of graphic scores" ("Bob Cobbing"). Previously, Eric Mottram, in "A Prosthetics of Poetry: the Art of Bob Cobbing" (1973), had accounted for Cobbing's non-semantic expression by recourse to R.D. Laing's assertion in *The Politics of Experience* (1967) that poetry's extra-linguistic elements invoked nascent, unbroachable states of communication, "recaptur[ing] personal meaning in a personal time and space from out of the sights and sound of a depersonalized, dehumanized world" (Laing qtd. 113). In relating Cobbing's apparent aims at medium transcendence to contemporary psychoanalytic thought, Mottram similarly downplayed its spiritual or mystical connotations.

A subgroup of these critics, including Robert Sheppard, acknowledge a transcendentalist colouring to Cobbing's 1960s work, but assert that this was surpassed by that more materialist model by the 1970s. In *The Poetry of Saying* (2005), Sheppard associates this with Cobbing's performances of non-semantic visual poetry from the late 1960s onwards, during which the referential qualities of graphic features had to be subjectively extemporised. This rendered each visual concrete poem the basis for multiple sonic versions, undermining the implication that the poem bore any objective essence. Connecting this with a turn to "processual" visual work, Sheppard contends that, "[g]iven this commitment to indeterminacy, Cobbing … seems to have largely abandoned claims for the ritualistic nature of this incantatory work in performance in preference for exploratory experiment and the processual" (222).

These readings warrant consideration. Certainly, to offer the explanation of Cobbing's intermedial poetics promised above, his most exciting multimedia poetry in fact works not by transcending medium boundaries, but by closely combining elements of different media to solicit interpretation shifting between their relative frameworks: his best visual poems teeter between writing and art, his best sonic poems between speech and music. Notably, these are combinations utilising the same sensory channels; nonetheless, in doing so they undoubtedly cast scrutiny on the definitude of sign

systems in general, by revealing their roots in the same pre-significatory matter, and thus the arbitrariness of their adaptation to any particular significatory task. In Cobbing's 1960s work, this does not seem the primary intention, that flicker between media geared towards the impression of non-mediate expression: sense beyond sense. The multiple forms his poems accrued in performance, by repelling interpretative closure, seem directed towards a similar end. But much of his post-1960s work does seem to display that kind of open-endedness more consciously. Unfortunately, space constraints largely confine me to the 1960s, but in conclusion I do assess how Cobbing's early-1970s work , by reincorporating semantics, exemplifies the impossibility of poetry's escape from mediation through abstraction.

This chapter initially assesses how the stylistic features and artistic influences of Cobbing's 1950s visual artworks and poems prefigure his visual and sonic concrete poetry respectively, framing them by recourse to contemporaneous studies written or co-written by Cobbing. I then consider presentiments of the scrutiny cast on semantics by Cobbing's concrete poetry in his late-1950s-early-1960s cut-up and permutational poems. After assessing artistic, cultural and social influences on *Sound Poems*, I analyse that collection as exemplary of Cobbing's early concrete poetry: sonically rather than visually preoccupied, with language's phonetic structures left in place. Following a comparable assessment of influences, including Cobbing's first engagement with the concrete poetry as a pre-existing entity, I assess *Eyearun* (1966), which contains his first visually oriented concrete, and in which, unlike *Sound Poems*, language's basic phonetic units begin to be broken down. Thereafter, I track the most significant development in Cobbing's work, the disintegration of the distinction between concrete's visual and sonic variants through the performance of non-semantic visual poems. This radically increased the remit of abstraction in Cobbing's work, by rendering sonic equivalents for non-phonetic visual marks, and by inviting multiple versions of single poems. This development is presaged by the improvised and non-text-based sonic concrete poems he produced during 1966-68, which I assess before tracing the shift itself across five publications: *So: Six Sound Poems* (1968), *Octo*, *Whisper Piece* and *Why Shiva Has Ten Arms* (1969), and *Kwatz* (1970). Finally, I touch on the residual presence of semantics in the 1970 booklets *Etcetera* and *Kris Kringle's Kesmes Korals*.

This 1960s focus overlooks many relevant developments: Cobbing's use of photocopiers from 1984 onwards, which generated the extraordinary visual work first

documented in the *Processual* series (1982-86), and in his tenth collected volume, of that name; his exploration of computer graphics from *Point of Departure* (1986) onwards; his involvement in performance groups including Konkrete Canticle, abAna, and Birdyak, and his formulation of dance as poesis. Nonetheless, my chapter focuses on the period when the fundamental characteristics of his concrete poetry were established.

## Early Artwork and Poetry

During the 1940s-50s, Cobbing worked as a community arts organiser and teacher in suburban north London.[3] During this time he wrote or contributed to various studies on the nature and history of art now stored with his British Library papers, including *The Purpose of Art* – submitted as teacher training coursework in 1949 – and "An Introduction to the Arts" and "The Arts Today": sets of notes, probably co-authored, for various courses taught at Hendon Technical College in the 1950s.

One relevant sentiment emerges most recurrently from these studies, which contextualises Cobbing's contemporaneous visual art and poetry and, in retrospect, aspects of his concrete style: that the most important qualities of any artwork are those which bypass signification to stimulate the senses. Visual and sonic art-forms thus seem a more primary focus than literature, and sound and sight generally are granted a fundamentally greater power than language:

> The beginning of our reaction to a work of art is always a disturbance of a sense organ – the eye or ear. In visual art by form and colour; in music by sound; in literature by the sound of words 'in the mind's ear' and by 'the feel of words imaginatively spoken'….Thus the mood or "atmosphere" of the experience to be expressed is at once established in our minds by the "formal elements" of a work of art. An understanding of reference or representation must be largely a matter of a special knowledge of the conditions of a particular time and place. ("An Introduction to the Arts" n.pag) [4]

Notably, language is considered primarily a spoken thing, its "formal elements" thus more sonic than visual.

As an ethos for poetry, this relative disavowal of linguistic power prefigures Cobbing's augmentation of language with visual and sonic effects from the mid-1960s onwards. But the studies show no developed sense of the possibility of a multimedia art,

perhaps because their sources, though encompassing early-twentieth-century abstract artists such as Henry Moore and Graham Sutherland, exclude art-forms associable with such syntheses of media: Dadaist phonic and graphic poetry, for example, or contemporaneous American event scores; or French Lettrism and Ultralettrism. These factors can be sensed in Cobbing's early visual art and poetry in different ways. His 1950s monoprints and paintings display an interest in abstract, sensorily arresting visual forms influenced by the kinds of artists referenced in the studies, but little intended sense of a formal overlap between visual art and writing; although their similarity to some of Cobbing's visual concrete poems makes such an overlap retroactively ascribable. His 1950s poetry, meanwhile, often displays a nascent multimedia sensibility in shaping language according to sound-pattern, but seems more influenced in this respect by Lewis Carroll or Vachel Lindsay than contemporaneous sound poetry. This also, however, suggests a raft of influences besides such avant-garde idioms brought to bear on Cobbing's concrete poetry itself.

Cobbing's monoprints and paintings were shown throughout the 1950s-60s at exhibitions organised by Hendon Experimental Art Group, cofounded by Cobbing in July 1951 and rechristened Group H in December 1957.[5] Most are now difficult to source, but some were reprinted in the ninth and twelfth volumes of his collected poetry, *Lame, Limping, Mangled, Marred and Mutilated* (1986) and *Improvisation Is a Dirty Word* (1990), reflecting their retrospectively inferable similarities to visual concrete poems, in their use of both abstract visual forms, and of visual forms interpretable in retrospect as a kind of pseudo-orthography.[6]

The eight prints from 1955 published in *Improvisation Is a Dirty Word* as "Shadowlight", "Trinity", "Flowering Stone", "Fossil Stone", "Crabtree" (two prints), "The Parade" and "Chasing Its Tail" are exemplary.[7] Mottled or coagulated visual patterns suggest composition with printing ink, using multisided stencils placed in the centre of the page, around which an inked layer was created, the space left after its removal then filled with a different colour or thickness of ink, using the sheet from which the first stencil was cut. The results are a series of angular, multisided shapes set apart from their backgrounds by thin white borders, and by variations in tone or colour.

Visually, these shapes suggest various organic forms: shards of ice or rock in "Fossil Stone"; primordial organisms or excavated skeletons in "Crabtree" (fig. 1), which features a distinctive, repeated curved shape with spikes or limbs extending from

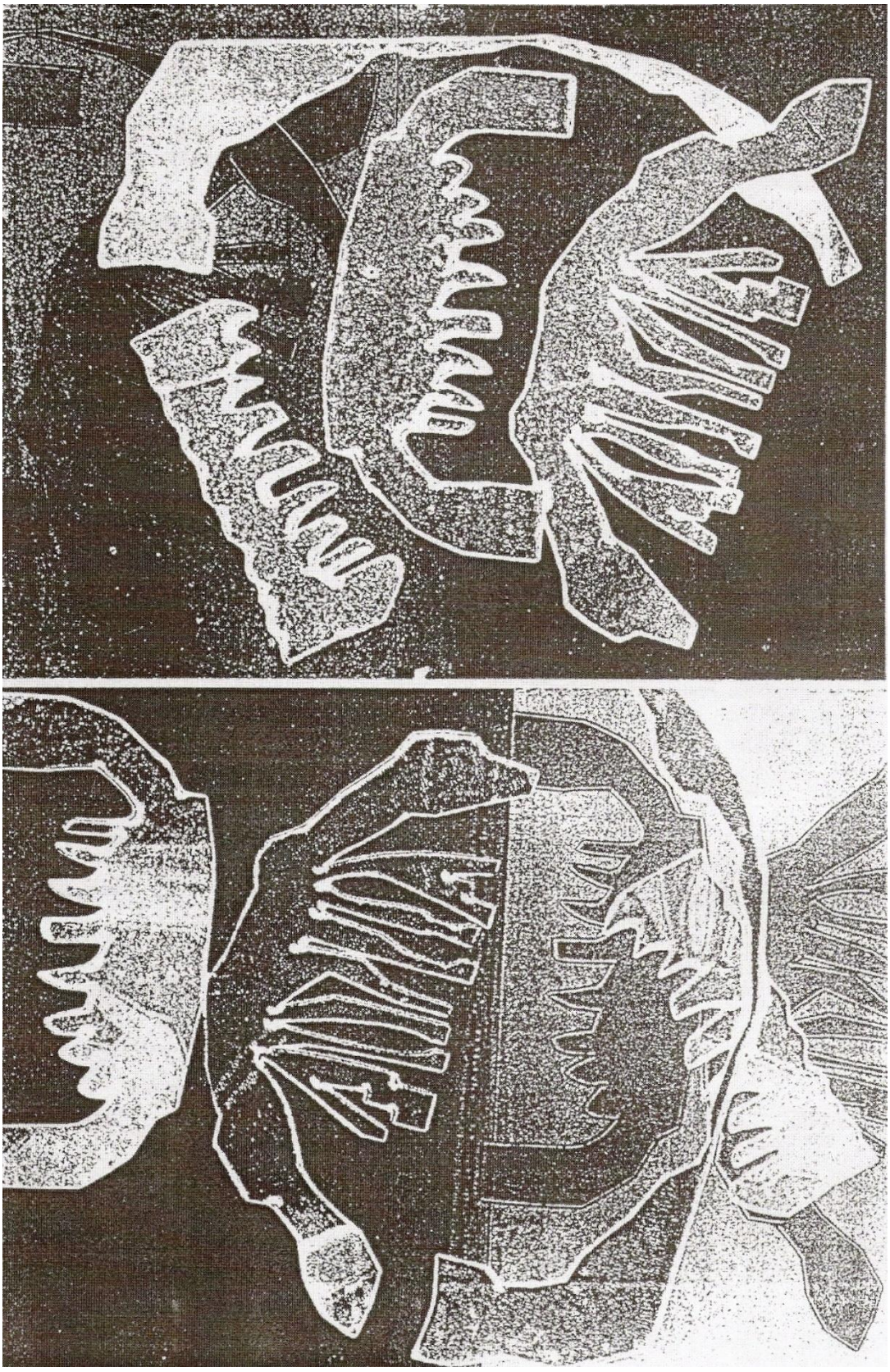


Fig. 1. “Crabtree”.

its concave sides, suggestive of some armour-plated prehistoric creature.[8] These abstract suggestions, often honed by a name foregrounding a particular reference, are typical of Cobbing's art of the period, and of the general focus of Group H, both of which, as John Rowan noted in the introduction to a 1966 anthology, were shifted by the early-1960s influence of abstract expressionism. They also foreshadow the abstract visual forms by which language was often replaced in Cobbing's later work.

In the context of Cobbing's subsequent output, the repetition of certain shapes achieved through the use of stencils also grants these pieces some subtly orthographic quality. In this context, excavated or prehistoric forms become runic inscriptions or carvings; a simultaneous likeness to cave painting suggests the roots of writing in pictography. The mottled black-and-white shapes – probably originally coloured – created by the coagulation of ink spread across large surfaces, are also reminiscent of Cobbing's more amorphous late-1960s visual concrete poems. His creation of some early prints on duplicators – machines for reproducing writing – implies another nexus with language probably retrospectively realised. That compositional technique extends back to his first monotype of 1942, a gloomy piece formed of triangular shapes of different intensities of grey, produced on a Roneo duplicator during Cobbing's work at Highlands Hospital in Enfield as a conscientious objector.[9] Both as abstract visual compositions, then, and as pieces metaphorically occupying the space between drawing and writing, these artworks manifest the pre-existing lexicon of gestures which Cobbing would turn to when extending his poetry's visual dimensions in the mid-1960s; it is notable that Cobbing gave up painting in 1963.

Little of Cobbing's 1950s poetry was published at the time, although some appeared in his fourth collected volume, *The Kollekted Kris Kringle Volume IV* (1979). The other source for the following discussion is an archived, unpaginated notebook, containing poems written from 1954-70, probably transcribed from 1960 onwards. These poems would have been performed and discussed at Writers' Circle, a group cofounded by Cobbing in December 1952, amalgamated in August 1958 with Hendon Poetry Society – cofounded by Cobbing in September 1950 – to create Writers Forum, which from the early 1960s onwards incorporated Cobbing's publishing activities.[10]

These poems are of mixed quality; their interest lies mainly in their relationship to Cobbing's concrete work. Many, for example, use striking alliterative and rhythmic effects, suggesting a burgeoning musical or multimedial sensibility. But their adherence

to various conventions of versification, and their evident influences, place them squarely in a literary idiom. One reference point was Robert Service's *Bar-Room Ballads*, another Vachel Lindsay's "The Congo", as Cobbing noted in a 1997 interview with Upton, emphasising continuity with influences on his later work:[11]

> Our English master in my last year at Enfield Grammar School in 1935-36, Dr. Marshall,…read us many exciting poems, including 'The Congo'.…I liked it for its evocative sound, giving the atmospheres of bar-room, cake-walk and jungle. It was entertaining; it performed well. It was my kind of poetry.…It prepared me for Joyce's 'Finnegan's Wake', Kerouac's 'Old Angel Midnight' … Gertrude Stein and Samuel Beckett … the performances of François Dufrêne, Henri Chopin and Bernard Heidsieck[,]....in the forties, fifties and early sixties I did many performances of poems like 'The Congo' and Robert Service's *Barrack Room Ballads* [sic.].

The spirit of Carroll and Lear's children's verse also seems an obvious influence. In "Bob Cobbing: and the Book as Medium" Upton notes that in later years, "Cobbing often broke into unannounced renditions of 'Jabberwocky' and 'You are Old Father William' from the Alice medley", again implying a continuity of influences.

Indeed, the poems themselves suggest both two distinct phases of creativity – pre-concrete and concrete – and the pervasive influence of writers like Carroll and Lindsay in the latter period. "A Daze of All my Days", composed January 1956, seems to allow rhyme-scheme to dictate word choice, generating a string of mainly triple-stressed lines granted residual semantic value by conventional grammar. The name implies a collage of dreams and memories; lapsing allusions to some communal religious environment may relate to Cobbing's involvement in his twenties with a liberal Methodist guild:

> Here are safer wafer-chafers
> With base, defaced grimaces
> Which are faintly, quaintly, saintly
> But, with cane, in skeins, enchained.
>
> Now they're gayish, now they're grayish
> Like bacon taken, shaken;
> Or like baked hake awakened
> To the Quaker fakir's acre….

The chant-like recital invited by regular stress positioning and rhyme is reminiscent of Cobbing's early sonic concrete poems, in which phonemes become permutational auditory units. But regular line lengths and clause-based syntax define individual words primarily as sentence components, granting the sequence a stolidly poetic, indeed doggerel rhythm, more suggestive of Carroll's "Rules and Regulations" (1845) than a poetry bordering music:

> A SHORT direction
> To avoid dejection
> By variations
> In occupations,
> And prolongation
> Of relaxation
> And combinations
> Of recreations…. (704)

But besides setting "A Daze" apart from collections like *Sound Poems*, such connections also reflect the residue of nursery rhyme and sing-song verse in that sequence itself.

In "Meditation on Worms" and "Snow" (1954), syntax begins to be broken down, forging a clearer connection with later work; these grid-based poems are also visually similar to 1960s works like *Chamber Music* (1967), as Chris Beckett notes in a 2010 survey of Cobbing's BL papers ("From the Bombast…" 19). The compositional sense leading from one word to another is semantic more than sonic, defined by staid titular theme, but absence of linear grammar invites the rhythmic incantations and improvised reading routes of Cobbing's sonic concrete poetry:

> Rust moth fungus mildew
> Dryrot canker maggott Worm
> Wriggle coil roll curl buckle
> Twine twirl twist wind spiral WORM
> ("Meditation on Worms")

This poem, visually reworked and renamed "Worm", became a staple of Cobbing's concrete repertoire. In later statements, Cobbing audaciously backdated his engagement with sonic concrete poetry or sound poetry to 1954, with these works in mind: they do indeed comprise a nexus between his 1950s and concrete poetry, but were exceptional rather than exemplary at the time.

Cut-ups and Permutationals

By 1960, Cobbing had moved from Hendon to Finchley.[12] From 1956 onwards, while continuing to paint and print, he had begun creating cut-up and permutational poetry. According to his poetry notebook, his first cut-ups date from March 1956: "Rare Monsters", "Choreographers Are Rare" and "Polygamous Instinct". The introduction to *Cygnet Ring* (1977), Cobbing's first collected volume, which contains cut-ups and permutationals, states:

> The method was to decide on the number of lines, clip out the newspaper lines of the required number, and paste them up in an effective order. Success was to use all the lines, failure to have one or more left over which did not fit in.…The sources … were mainly newspapers, 'The Observer' and 'The Sunday Times' especially. The third one was from 'The Daily Mirror' - note the shorter lines. Art and music magazines were also used, a catalogue of Roneo accessories, and company reports.

These experiments predate Burroughs and Gysin's 1959 cut-ups, first published, alongside Corso's and Sinclair Beiles's, in *Minutes to Go* (1960). Tristan Tzara had extrapolated a similar method 40 years earlier, although Cobbing's 1950s critical writing suggests possible ignorance of this.[13] His first permutational, "A Line from the Observer", later titled "Are Your Children Safe in the Sea?" dates from 1960. Cobbing's permutationals, like Morgan's, exact incremental grammatical alterations upon repeated lines of found text, altering their meaning, although less dexterously. Unlike his earlier poems, the cut-ups and permutationals were published, notably in *And* 2 (February 1961) and 3 (February 1963), and in *Massacre of the Innocents* (1963) a joint-publication with John Rowan.[14]

These poems partly show Cobbing more concertedly exploring language's visual and sonic potentials. The cut-ups are visually striking, composed through a kind of collaging process reflected, or at least homaged, by the lines' spatial juxtapositions. In "A Prosthetics of Poetry" (1973), Mottram took this as the most significant stylistic feature of *Massacre of the Innocents*: "[it] contains work which at first glance might seem to be conventionally linear; but their urge is towards stabilized diagram, itemized pieces of information in a spatial lay-out which is in fact the syntax" (105). The permutationals, meanwhile, develop hypnotic auditory rhythms upon recital, presaging the other, sonic

pole of Cobbing's concrete work. Indeed, a 1966 recording of "Are Your Children Safe in the Sea?" – with sound-effects by Annea Lockwood – became one of Cobbing's best-known poems. However, in their treatment of pre-existing text, these poems also prefigure the scrutiny of semantics – both in-and-of-itself, and as a tool of socio-cultural conditioning – in Cobbing's concrete; this is the quality focused on below.

In many cut-ups, including "Rare Monsters", semantic logic as such seems at stake:

Take a step. Sit down. Curl up by
"never"
back siphonage, a non-return
to those who are in
strawberry peacock
"sometime"

"Almost"
follows each move you make
along the Danube
A professor is appointed –
and the murderer becomes
a recurrent leitmotif….[15]

Inverted commas – imported from the source-text? – imply the questionability of words, in this case adverbs; their use as nouns renders them objects under scrutiny, rather than descriptive qualifiers. Language becomes an unwieldy material object, observable from a sceptical distance: "Curl up by/ "never" "; " "Almost" follows each move you make". The sentiment is enhanced by the feeling of words-as-things generated by knowledge of the composition process, and by the shifting margins, which render each line a spatially isolated unit even as the poem flows grammatically onwards. The overall implication is that language cannot be impartial, because it is part of the landscape it describes.

Other cut-ups take aim at language's distortion in specific cultural contexts, relying on the inference of certain types of source-text for those contexts to be identified. Cobbing's collaging of entire lines of text, rather than single words, for example, becomes significant in these poems. The *Massacre of the Innocents* poem "Lies like Truth" subjects advertising copy and broadsheet-style journalism to its amputations and prostheses:

today new beauty comes within your grasp
those qualities which reveal sensibility of vision
and imply a personal philosophy
an agency is an advocate and a wise advocate will
never lie
but has a true country-fresh flavour
that the falsification is deliberate is most unlikely
for it does wash whiter than white….

Portentous phrases, perhaps from *Observer* or *Times* editorials, are undercut by association with the fatuous persuasions of consumer capitalism: "a wise advocate will/ never lie/ but has a true country-fresh flavour". The poem loses some exciting quality of accident by the authorship evident in this polemic, but also generates greater critical friction.

The permutationals intensify this scrutiny of language, magnifying single lines through repetition, using grammatical mutation to unlock bathetic or counterintuitive messages within them. "A Line from the Observer", also from *Massacre*, interrogates the gentle demagoguery of public-interest journalism, its grammatical modulations suggesting investigation of the source-line from every angle:

Are your children safe in the sea?
Are your children safely in the sea?
Are your children safe? In the sea
Are your children. Safe in the sea
Are your children. Safe? In the sea?

By the same process, the tone shifts from one of feigned concern to menacing insatiability.

Other poems document Cobbing's early-1960s confrontations with local journalists and artists. "Make Perhaps This Out Sense of Can You" reworks the title of a *Kilburn Times* review (unattributed; August 16, 1963) concerning Group H's thirtieth exhibition, pasted into an archived scrapbook: "I am not an artist, and I am not so terribly old, but I completely fail to see the point of these particularly offensive exhibits, or to believe in their artistic merit, a fiction carefully cherished by a section of the art world". A letter from Cobbing (August 23, 1963; pasted into the same scrapbook) congratulates the editor "on the heading of your review … ! Unfortunately, the review itself did not maintain the same high standards[,]…it is in the nature of new and good

art to be reviled when it first appears" ("Group H"). In Cobbing's poetry notebook the poem is dated "September/December 1963":

> Perhaps you can make sense out of this.
> This make of can, you - perhaps - sense out.
> This can make you 'out of sense', perhaps.
> Out of this can, you make sense, perhaps….

The piece opens up fissures in grammatical logic while suggesting the virtues of ambiguity: "Out of 'perhaps' you can make this sense". It also exploits the double-meaning of "can" to critique the convention-driven, consumerist mentality taken to account for the reviewer's scorn: "Can you make sense, perhaps, out of this/ Make of can? You sense out, perhaps, this/ 'You' out of this can…."

## *Sound Poems*: Context and Influences

In the autumn of 1964 Cobbing left his final full-time teaching position at Alder Secondary Modern School in Finchley, which he had inherited from his friend Jeff Nuttall the previous autumn. He taught part-time until January 1965, then began working at Better Books bookshop off Charing Cross Road; by this point he was living in Maida Vale. During autumn 1964, Cobbing composed most of his alphabetical sequence *Sound Poems*, partly under the influence of auditory hallucinations brought on by a bout of flu: as he often noted in interviews. According to his poetry notebook however, "A" and "B" were composed earlier, on May 31, and "C" on June 23, followed by "D" and "E" on September 7 and 10; the remaining poems are dated "Nov 64". In a 1996 interview with Rolf Ahmann and Andre Lentz, Cobbing recalled composing the first three for a Writers Forum workshop; by chance they began with *A*, *B* and *C*: "sufficient clue for me to want to complete the whole alphabet".

Cobbing almost certainly composed *Sound Poems* without extensive knowledge of concrete poetry, and quite possibly without any knowledge of it. Nonetheless, I consider it his first "concrete" collection, both because of its engagement with language's materials aspects, and because of his subsequent presentation of it as such. Of course, this critical reconfiguration altered the nature of the work presented: so, more accurately, *Sound Poems* became concrete poetry after being described as such, just like the early-

1950s poems of Gomringer or the Noigandres. This absence of engagement with concrete style accounts for its divergence from classical models. Influences upon its composition, besides biographical and cultural shifts, encompass French sound poetry, American beat and cut-up poetry, and Dadaist phonic poetry: assessed in turn below.

Cobbing's resignation from Alder, besides presumably freeing up composition time, also reflected his increasing ideological and practical engagement with the growth of the 1960s UK counter-culture, or "Underground", to use the term favoured in Nuttall's 1968 thesis-memoir *Bomb Culture*. For Nuttall, the Underground grew from a sense of instinctive collective repugnance at the bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, after which "all social entities around which morality had revolved were … called into doubt" (19): "the Underground … was simply what you did in the H-bomb world if you were, by nature, creative and concerned for humanity as a whole" (160). Nuttall thus took the anti-nuclear Aldermaston marches as important galvanising factors.

One of the Underground's primary tenets, Nuttall asserted, was the promotion of untrammelled self-expression, both "to release forces into the prevailing culture that would dislocate society, untie its stabilizing knots of morality", and "to expand the range of human consciousness outside the continuing and ultimately soul-destroying boundaries of the political/utilitarian frame of reference" (239). An undated archived note entitled "Examples of an Illiberal Attitude at Alder School, Finchley" suggests that Cobbing's resignation reflected his adherence to all these principles, taking homogenous religious practices as one "stabilizing knot": "boys have been discouraged from transferring to pre-art school courses; Jewish and Catholic boys have been forced to sit through non-conformist Christian services; a boy who went on a CND march was reported to the headmaster who gave him a lecture on the 'badge of cowardice'…." Nuttall also recounts his and Cobbing's involvement with activities emblematic of the UK Underground's rapid growth in the early 1960s: "putting on shows in hired rooms, exclaiming our poetry in public, swinging the duplicator handle through the long summer of 1963" (161). The famous June 1965 Albert Hall poetry reading, a high-point of counter-cultural visibility documented in Peter Whitehead's film *Wholly Communion*, was organised at Better Books during Cobbing's time there, after an impromptu reading at the shop by Ginsberg (Nuttall *Bomb Culture* 228).[16]

The compositional mode of *Sound Poems* partly reflects both counter-cultural aims, and a sense of art's power to achieve them. One of the counter-culture's enabling

ideas, that is, was that modes of thought and expression formed the nucleus around which patterns of socioeconomic organisation cohered; revolutions in thought and expression could thus incite revolutions on a socioeconomic scale. This inversion of Marxist base-superstructure models was typified in Trocchi's 1963 manifesto "Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds":

> We are concerned not with the *coup-d'etat* of Trotsky and Lenin, but with the *coup-du-monde*, a transition of necessity more complex, more diffuse....The cultural revolt must seize the grids of expression and the powerhouses of the mind. Intelligence must become self-conscious, realise its own power, and, on a global scale, transcending functions that are no longer appropriate, dare to exercise it. History will not overthrow national governments; it will outflank them. (34-35)[17]

This was a paradigm within which language was a powerful means of reinforcing the interests of power, but art was a means of seizing the grids of expression which language controlled: of forging new ways of thinking, communicating, and of being, socially. *Sound Poems's* trangression of semantics, and poesis of abstract sonic effects, presupposes both language's insidious power, and non-linguistic poetry's benevolent power. Cobbing's ultimate aims were also partly counter-cultural: transcendence of the corrupt socioeconomic systems which language held in place, and inauguration of equitable forms of community through communication emanating from and to common centres of human cognition.[18]

Stylistically, *Sound Poems* was fundamentally influenced by French sound poetry, as Cobbing noted to Ahmann and Lentz: "what really started me off was a visit from France by Henri Chopin and Bernard Heidsieck. They did performances at [the ICA]. I'd been toying with the idea of doing something along those lines myself, but that visit prompted me to work on my ABC in Sound". Cobbing's archived notes for a late-1960s radio broadcast describe the "C" from *Sound Poems* – or "An ABC in Sound" – as a homage to Chopin (*An ABC in Sound*). His "performance" was probably during the event at the ICA on May 12, 1964 at which Houédard presented part two of his "Eyear" lecture, having delivered the first at the RCA in March.[19] The composition dates for Cobbing's "A" "B" and "C" poems follow shortly after the ICA event.

Writing to Morgan in July 1964, Houédard described "Eyear" part two as "the ear part", during which, the transcript stored with Morgan's papers suggests, Houédard

outlined the tenets of French sound poetry, having covered German and Brazilian concrete at the RCA event, which Cobbing seems to have missed. The below account was thus probably his introduction to the genre:

> when we come to the 3rd group centred in france on the mag CS [*Cinquième Saison*, later renamed *OU*] ed by hc [Henri Chopin] the scenery changes a little … EAR or noise verse – not eyeverse … & human not machine/instrument noise … the deepdown interest here is in human life … poetry as human communication of any sort – thru gesture dance mime movement (charlie chaplin as poet) – as well as thru sound & sight – music painting sculpture – for some reason … EYEVERSE is a much less central concern – perhaps because alphabets are felt to have been exhausted as an avantgarde tool….

Houédard clarified this "interest in human life" as an "interest in the human voice, not as a tool or medium for conveying cartesian ideas from mind to listener – but … as matter materia". All these characteristics would have been congenial to Cobbing: the distrust of Cartesian, referential language; the interest in generating non-referential poetic expression – "voice as matter" – through extra-linguistic gesture, thus reframing poetry "as human communication of any sort"; the "deepdown interest in human life", implying an ultimate goal of cognitive empathy between poet and audience, and a focus on self-expression. By contrast, Houédard's description of classical concrete stressed the absence of both descriptive reference and subjective expression: "concrete … doesn't copy either nature or mind – neither inner or outer cosmos – it is objective – creating structures to exist in nature". Cobbing's engagement through Houédard with French sound poetry seems partly to account for the distinction between the kinds of objective expression sought in his concrete poetry and in classical concrete, the former unearthing qualities at the core of subjective expression, the latter seeking to transcend it; a relative disinterest in "eyeverse" is also apparent in *Sound Poems*.

The influence of beat poetry is more subtle, rooted in Cobbing's long-time engagement with the genre. According to HAT bulletins, the beats were discussed at Writers Forum meetings from around 1958, while archived press cuttings document three evenings of beat poetry readings organised by Cobbing and HAT held at North Finchley Library on January 21, March 18 and December 2, 1961. Alongside performances of poems by Ferlinghetti, Patchen, Burroughs, Creeley and others, there were readings by UK-based poets such as Pete Brown, Anselm Hollo – who performed

Schwitters "Superbirdsong" at the second – Adrian Mitchell and Spike Hawkins.[20] The use of jazz accompaniments at these readings – taped at the first, at the second using live bongos and saxophone – was one precedent for Cobbing's development of musical effects in the performed poetic line. Another was Kerouac's *Old Angel Midnight* (1959), excerpts from which were read at the first two readings, and in which Cobbing felt that the qualities of jazz music had begun to be been imparted to language itself. Describing the work to Mottram in 1973, he stated: "[h]e is really writing bop jazz there, actually writing it on the page, using words" (*Composition and Performance in the Work of Bob Cobbing* [16]). The exaggerated rhythms, alliteration and neologisms of Kerouac's poetic-prose text – a rambling mythopoeic vision set at the author's windowsill, lapsing in and out of natural observation – clearly inflects the sound-style of *Sound Poems* (15): "this is a mysterious yak the bird makes, yick, – wowf wow wot sings the dog blud blut blup below the Homestead Deer – red robins with saffron scarlet or orange rud breasts make a racket in the dry dead car crash tree".[21] In a different vein, Cobbing's unpublished poem "Beat Generation" (May 3, 1958), although not finessed, reflects his empathy with the beats' inferred aims of social collapse and rebirth, and thus the ideological as well as stylistic basis of their influence:

> Doomed to the necessary ruin
> On which a firm clean world can be built
> They take us beyond the possibility of defeat
>
> No point Now in being constructive
> Annihilate the present
> To ensure any future at all

A related influence was cut-up poetry, particularly Burroughs's: Burroughs's *Minutes to Go* contributions were characterised, unlike Cobbing's earlier cut-ups, by the division of source-phrases through words and syllables, suggesting not just an assault on existing language, but a new language spreading virally across its cells; his primary technique involved separating squares of printed text into four sections by slicing along their vertical and horizontal axes and rearranging them:

> at land coccus germs
> by a bacilmouth Jersy phenicol bitoics
> the um vast and varied that

specific target was the vast popul....[in orig.]

the vast
cancers that surgery and Xrays C
In the United States the Americi
Is considered well worth out feet….
("Cancer Men...These Individuals are Marked Foe..." 12)

Cobbing read from *Minutes to Go* at the third beat evening; Burroughs's influence is also evident in an untitled poem from Cobbing's poetry notebook, composed September 4, 1962, opening "Burroughs welcome!" in reference to Burroughs's appearance at the Edinburgh Writers Conference during which Trocchi and MacDiarmid had locked horns.[22] Notably, this poem's cut-lines, unlike those of earlier pieces, cut, Burroughs-style, through words and sentences:

Urn with an ecstasy
gemlike persistent
sheer egotistical
write his Auto-bio
  her keeper by Mr.
Ut-en-a-revie
(crypto-American)
  Nev-I-essed Scott

The resultant staccato rhythm of lines such as "Ut-en-a-revie", and the generation of neologistic strings of word-fragments, presages the rhythmic, percussive, often non-semantic soundscapes of *Sound Poems*. Gysin's *Minutes to Go* contributions are another feasible reference point, mirroring some classical concrete traits more closely, poems like "CALLING ALL RE ACTIVE AGENTS" created by shuffling a small number of source-words, using regular lineation and capitalised type.

In composing *Sound Poems*, Cobbing was thus responding to many of the same literary developments as Morgan, whose 1962 essay "The Fold-In Conference" is another tribute to Burroughs's Edinburgh appearance. But whereas Morgan distinguished between the cultural and stylistic contexts for these developments, Cobbing incorporated all of them into a poetic style latterly defined as "concrete", reflecting the breadth of value he assigned the term.

It is worth finally noting the extensive stylistic similarities between *Sound Poems* and Dadaist phonic poetry, distinguished from French sound poetry, as explained below, by its use of phonemic and syllabic structures. The collection's atavistic attachment to "primitive" speech, and retention of language's basic auditory units, are more reminiscent of Ball's "Karawane", for example, than Chopin's mechanically reduced vocal matter. Similarly, the ethos behind Cobbing's poetry – distrust of language, perhaps because of its corruption in public culture; desire for a poetry of abstract visual-sonic forms – reiterates various imperatives expressed in Ball's *Flight Out of Time*, many of them inherited from symbolist poetics: "in these phonetic poems we totally renounce the language that journalism has abused and corrupted. We must return to the innermost alchemy of the word, we must even give up the word too, to keep for poetry its last and holiest refuge" (71). "Language as a social organ can be destroyed without the creative process having to suffer. In fact, it seems that the creative powers even benefit from it….Language is not the only means of expression. It is not capable of communicating the most profound experiences" (76). Cobbing tended not to stress this influence, perhaps because of its awkward pervasiveness. He may have composed *Sound Poems* without extensive knowledge of it, although total ignorance seems unlikely given, for example, Hollo's performance of Schwitters's work at the second beat reading.

*Sound Poems*

Although *Sound Poems* represents a break in Cobbing's poetry, the evident extent of such influences arguably makes it more exemplary than exceptional within its literary-cultural context. We might query Mottram's grandiose assertion that "no one at that date compared with anything like his absorption with the interactions of visual, sonic and connotative meaning in language" ("A Prosthetics of Poetry" 107), favouring Morgan's cannier assessment in *Poet Meat* (1965), which acknowledges this enabling context, even if for Cobbing it excluded concrete poetry: "in recent years a lot of attention has again been paid to two of the basic elements in poetry: its visual and its sonic effects" ("*Sound Poems* by Bob Cobbing … "). However, the collection's playful, childlike quality is uniquely Cobbing's and, as Morgan added, "it would be a dull heart that got no pleasure from [these] multilingual incantations".

*Sound Poems* seems more preoccupied with sonic than visual effects as concomitants of semantic decimation: the performance instructions at the back of the text suggest that it was intended to be heard and not seen. These sonic effects primarily comprise collages of vocal sounds from various foreign tongues – including French, Japanese and nominally "ancient" languages – tempered by translatable semantic allusions. After assessing them by reference to the distinction between phonic and sound poetry raised above, taking Cobbing's "C" poem as an example, I consider this combination of effects by reference to those three linguistic sources in turn. I also consider the collection's more critical, anti-semantic qualities, exemplified by poems in Cobbing's own language, before assessing the types of performance and auditory treatment which the poem-as-text facilitated, curtailed by its "phonic" character.

"A", "B" and "C" are among six of the *Sound Poems* which employ French words and syllables, seemingly in homage to French sound poetry:[23]

> Cri Zok cri zok cri zok
> Rinkle stammen rinkle stammen
> Tak tak tak tak
> Gros temps gros temps gros
> Temps temps temps tempe
> Temps terre temps terre
> Plume de ma tante
> Tu dors tu dors
> To two too door
> A door adore
> Toc toc toc toc
> Tu dors tu dors
> Zzzzzz Zzzzzz
> Z ([7])

Besides Cobbing's use of phonemes common in French, his alignment of linguistic units by accentual or phonemic structure, and lack of conjunctive grammar, generates a new emphasis on sound-texture, in probable response to Chopin, Heidsieck and François Dufrêne's prior experiments in isolating language's auditory building blocks. But Cobbing's breakdown of spoken language is nowhere near as extensive as those poets'. In terms of a distinction of Chopin's, extrapolated by Steve McCaffery in "Voice in Extremis" (1998) and other essays, Cobbing's "C" poem is, like much Dadaist or Futurist poetry, "phonic". It breaks down language into units which still function as, or

give a non-functional impression of, speech: often words, never smaller than phonemes. In such work, McCaffery states, "semantics return": "either in recognisable words or a comprehensible 'syntax' suggestive of an unknown language" (164). By contrast, in the "sonic" poetry of "Ultralettrists" such as Chopin, vocal sound is dissociated from speech by extreme mechanical manipulation, or by the use of non-verbal vocal sources, creating "a more extra than paralinguistic phenomena" (168).[24] In particular, by decelerating the voice on magnetic tape, Chopin discovered a notional sub-phonemic unit called the "micro-particle" which became the basic compositional motif of his 1960s work. In his poem "Sol Air" (1961-64), for example, microseconds of recorded vocal sound are stretched on magnetic tape over huge durations, magnifying tiny increments of noise. One upshot of this distinction is that, although Cobbing's poem is designed to exist primarily in sound, it can be translated into phonetic writing, as above. "Sol Air" really exists only in recording or performance, despite the composition notes printed under that name in Solt's anthology.

This distinction signifies not only Cobbing's less advanced adaptation of an avant-garde poetic idiom, but also his attachment to subterranean semantic suggestion, and to the *impression* of speech, as is particularly clear in his use of "ancient" languages. Cobbing's "A" poem, for example, overlays a shifting sound-texture with various strata of semantic reference:

> Adventure
> Aventure
> Aventureux
> Adventure
> Aventure
> Aventureuse
> Adventurous…. ([3])

An unfolding "adventure" in sound is perhaps alluded to, as is, by more homely reference, the old-fashioned rote learning of grammar in classrooms; Cobbing had taught French as well as art. Other Francophone poems, by contrast, contain paradoxical linguistic references to language's demise:

> Bleep
> La lune Loop
> Le jour est mort

Ontala tala tala

La loupe.....[in orig.]
Tala tala
Les runes Droop
Langage
Est mort ([25])

Language is dead: or at least writing (the runes droop). But this message, rather than being encapsulated in granular, Chopin-esque vocal noise, is linguistically expressed: admittedly in terms at a very slight remove from non-French speakers. Lines like "tala tala" seem to subsume language more consummately, but that sound is also semantically allusive, "tāla" a Sanskrit-derived term for rhythm in Indian classical music.

"D", "I" and "Y" generate a similar range of effects with Japanese, although lexical allusions in poems like "I" are more likely to be opaque on first engagement:

iji, iji-baru ijo
iki iki iki-jibiki
ika ikaku ikakucho
ikana ikagono ikasama….([19])

This dipthong-less diction partly generates a staccato musical solo: "needle sharp", as the poem's performance instructions state ([55]). But various phrases also invoke writing or travelling – "jibiki": encyclopaedia; "iki": journey; "kaku": passage of literature, stroke of written character, to write/scratch/draw – thus again entwining sense with sound.

Other *Sound Poems* employ non-first world phrases and chants, some lifted from C.M. Bowra's *Primitive Song* (1962), a study of the origins of creative expression which considers them analogous to stone age song, because "they are less organized and elaborate than modern songs", and are produced in "conditions in many respects close to those of the late Paleolithic age" (3). These poems are generally bereft of semantic reference, relying on rhythm and pitch-based effects, as well as the impression of a lost ancestral language renderable through phonic poetry, and, via a combination of the two, a suggestion of speech's roots in pre-semantic oral gesture.

Cobbing's association of pre-linguistic expressive purity with certain isolated Asian and South American languages is arguably objectifying. Peter Manson describes "the way Cobbing used non-European languages" as "the aspect of his work I was least

comfortable with: it felt like a literal objectification of language that was only meaningless because he hadn't bothered to learn it" (message to the author). The point is largely valid, although in this case the borrowed sound-patterns – used in the "H" and "T" poems – were non-semantic in their original context, so emphasising their non-mediatory aspects seems less problematic.

These two poems use extant chant-patterns of the Patagonian Selk'nam tribe and the Veddas of Sri Lanka, both, Bowra states, composed of "unintelligible, emotive noises" set to a fixed tune, the Selk'nam song also associated with a specific time: morning (58-59). That fragment reads "*Ha-ra-xe-u-ka ha-ra-xe-u-ka ha-ra-xe-u*"; the Veddic fragment "*Tan tandinanan tandinane/ Tanan tandina tandinane*" (59). Using grammatical modulation, Cobbing builds two poems around these kernels of sound. "H" opens on the Selk'nam line; on the following line the first letter of each hyphen-separated section is replaced with the next consonant in the alphabet, except for the fourth, vowel-based section, which is replaced by an expostulatory noise:

> Ha-ra-xe-u-ka ha-ra-xe-u-ka ha-ra-xe-u
> Ja-se-yeh-ee-la Ja-se-yeh-ee-la Ja-se-yeh-ee
> Ka-ta-zeh-umm-ma Ka-ta-zeh-umm-ma Ka-ta-zeh-umm
> La-va-beh-oh-na La-va-beh-oh-na La-va-beh-oh…. ([17])

The performance should be "monotonously rhythmical", according to Cobbing's voice prompts; his own 1960s performances use a set, syncopated rhythm ([55]). The poem suggests both a percussive musical sequence and, through pseudo-syntactical effects, the unbroachable sense of tongues or shaker song.

"T", described by Houédard as Cobbing's "most elegantly complex and sophisticated pure-sound-poem", repeats approximations of the Veddic sequence over six four-line stanzas ("Bob Cobbing: Troubadour and Poet" 4). Over the first three, Cobbing introduces seven new sounds – "tanare", "tandita", "tantarata", "tanrotu", "tankrina", "tanrita", "tantarane" – bringing *k*, *t*, *o* and *u* into the phonic range:

> Tan tandinanan tandinane
> Tanan tandina tandinane
> Tanare tandita tandinane
> Tantarata tandina tandita
>
> Tan tandinanan tandina

Tanan tanare tandita
Tantarata tanrotu tankrina
Tan tandinanan tankrina

Tanan tanare tankrina
Tanrotu tanrita tantarane
Tanrotu tantarata tantarane
Tantarane tanrita tanrita….([41])

Over the final three stanzas, these twelve unique lines are shuffled by a set formula, the first lines of the first three stanzas repeated in order, followed by the second, third and fourth. The fourth stanza thus begins: "Tan tandinanan tandinane/ Tan tandinanan tandina/Tanan tanare tankrina". The resultant auditory patterning is hypnotic, complemented, as Houédard notes, by a swelling effect built up around the longest line, "Tanrotu tantarata tantarane", placed in the third and sixth stanzas, the poem's middle and end points (4). Again, an impression of arcane semantic value is generated, with overtones of religious ritual. But the mathematical modulation of lines in both poems counterbalances this, suggesting mechanical as well as mystical means of evading mediation, more in line with classical method. Other poems adopt similarly formulaic compositional principles. "W", for example, comprises only palindromes, allowing more proclamations on the death of language: "drownword", "word row worn row" ([47]).

The desire manifested in these pieces for a poetry of abstract, non-significatory effects is offset by those in Cobbing's own language, which exemplify his anti-semantic zeal, notably "S", a bottom-heavy wedge of sociolinguistic terms:

Sign
Sound
Sense
Symbol
Signal
Speech
Symptom
Syllable
Semiosis….([39])

The terms become increasingly tortuous, performing a "sardonic commentary upon the jargon of sociolinguistics" (Sheppard 219), closing on a critique of institutional language's complicity with political and economic subjugation:

Symbolicdifferential
Supportingredundancy
Sociallyinstitutionalized
Systematicwholeofspeechsounds

Shit ([39])

The isolated final line asserts, perhaps heavy-handedly, language's status as bodily expulsion, while delivering a deadpan blow to "socially institutionalised" academic terminology. However, Cobbing's performances tended to nuance these effects, intoning "shit" in bemusement or titillation.

Indeed, the whole sequence was meant to be heard: ideally in performance but potentially in recording. Cobbing himself produced various recorded versions of it, including the unadorned recital taped at Better Books in January 1965 – after his first performance of the sequence, at the ICA that month – co-released that September on a Writers Forum LP alongside Ernst Jandl's "Sprechgedichte".[25] In late 1965, another version was created, at the BBC radiophonic workshop, employing voice overlay, acceleration and deceleration, and textural treatment. It was broadcast, as "An ABC in Sound", by George Macbeth on the *Third Programme*, on January 7, 1966.

This generation of multiple sonic versions of single visual poems was the precursor to a radical abstraction of poetic form, involving the mapping of sounds to non-phonetic marks – a movement from "phonic" to "sonic" poetry – and the multiple individual sonic interpretations necessitated by lack of phonetic grammar or textual linearity. These recordings largely predate that development, the Better Books recording reflecting the conventional orthography and implied reading order of the text, which was, as Sheppard states, "an unpunctuated score for recitation" (218).

However, putting aside the peculiarities of any translation of writing into speech, both the textual and sonic versions of *Sound Poems* reflect a burgeoning sense of possible discontinuities between the two forms. In the first case, Cobbing's performance instructions, although somewhat pre-constraining, often use idiomatic phrases with ambiguous interpretative connotations: "W", befitting its compositional formula, should

be "palindromic", possibly inviting reading from start to finish then back again, or a certain intonational or timbral pattern ([55]). Others explicitly solicit individual reading routes, the note on "R" inviting "any path from Rebus to Repeat" – the top-left and bottom-right words, named after Rauschenberg paintings – adding: "Read several times each time a different route" (ibid.).

In the second case, Cobbing's recorded performances exploited the limited possibilities for spontaneity afforded by such instructions. His BBC version, moreover, uses effects unique to the studio to create a more singular realisation, even if, as Stephen Willey's *Spoken Word* liner notes state, Cobbing came to prefer the unadorned recordings ("Bob Cobbing" [5]). The "ABC" opens on three low throbbing sounds, like ships' foghorns but vocally generated: a prelude without textual cue. The "A" poem then proceeds in a frantically raised and accelerated tone, slowing to natural speed at the median word "Aveugle" before racing back up to an exclamatory finish; use of reverb, in combination with these effects, suggests impassioned political rallying. "H" receives one of the most effective treatments, a regular, syncopated recital gradually overlaid several times, implying an organically developing group chant. Exaggerated staggering and counterpointing suggests a round or cacophony of singers following a tune at different speeds, vividly enhancing the text's suggestions of ritual; pitch-variations distinguish between individual voices. In general, the sequence is perhaps too dependent on vocal acceleration and deceleration to generate peaks and troughs of emphasis, but it is a striking and singular rendering of *Sound Poems* nonetheless, enhancing metaphors implicit in the text and generating new ones: a prelude to the multiplication and abstraction of poetic form to come.

## Visual Concrete: *Eyearun*, Context and Influences

Cobbing apparently only discovered concrete poetry in the process of publishing and circulating *Sound Poems*, as he recalled to Mottram in 1973, both tellingly disregarding distinctions with French sound poetry:

> E.M. At what point did you sense that what you were doing was part of a widespread thing, stretching from the Noigandres group in Brazil through to people like Dûfrene and Chopin in France, and Heissenbüttel in Germany?

> B.C. I can tell you exactly: November, 1964....I had a flu and a very high temperature, and I had finished off in that week my "ABC in Sound" … as soon as I had done that, I started sending copies around to various people I had vaguely heard of … like Dom Sylvester Houédard ... I had never met any of them at that time … John Sharkey ... Edwin Morgan....Immediately the responses started coming back … from abroad as well. (*Composition and Performance* [7])

Cobbing's work subsequently began to appear in concrete-associated journals such as *Tlaloc*, *Second Amaranth, Link*, and the dedicated 1966 issue of *Extra Verse* containing Houédard's article "Bob Cobbing: Troubadour and Poet". Cobbing also published the visual concrete poem *Typestract 1* (1965), while "Grin", a version of "G" from *Sound Poems*, appeared in Mayer's *Concrete Poetry Britain Canada United States* (1966). In October-November 1965, he also exhibited at Reichardt's Between Poetry and Painting. The following July, Cobbing's next collection *Eyearun* appeared, containing "Grin", *Typestract 1*, his journal contributions, and various new poems. This was Cobbing's first collection produced in response to concrete poetry, in particular Houédard's. This partly explains its clearer visual orientation; but this probably also reflected Cobbing's recent abandonment of abstract painting, and the more tangential influence upon his work of his employment at Better Books. These factors are considered in turn below, along with the connection between Cobbing's relationship with Houédard and his re-historicisation of concrete poetry.

Cobbing's adaptation of concrete poetry typified its reception in London. Nuttall's London-focused description of the style really evokes Cobbing's version of it:

> Concrete poetry … is … a development of the aesthetic potential in the leavings of Dada. Its message, finally, is close to that of Tzara, of Burroughs, of Rothko, of Laing, of John Latham. No Thing (no particular thing, no defined thing, no isolated thing, all-inclusive totality, total spirit) is Everything. Everything is Nothing. (*Bomb Culture* 149)

As Nuttall suggests, the visual concrete in *Eyearun* redirected the classical concrete manoeuvre of visualising language, initially intended to stabilise or programmatise semantic meaning, towards the anti-semantic imperatives differently emblematised by Zurich Dada, cut-up poetry, and Latham's 1960s book burnings, plumbings and assemblages. The visual effects which sometimes subsumed language in this work partly relate to abstract expressionist painting, while the attendant aim of intermedial

expression by now nascent in Cobbing's poetics can partly be connected to the anti-psychiatry movement's aims to transcend socially mediated subjectivity.

This angle of engagement reflects the type of concrete poetry Cobbing was most enthused by: primarily Houédard's. *Eyearun* was probably named after his 1964 talk; Houédard also wrote the collection's introduction, dividing the constituent poems according to formal distinctions coined in "Troubadour and Poet"; Cobbing also named three of its constituent poems "typestracts". Notably, in interview with Görtschacher (1995), he recalled meeting Houédard shortly after starting to compose *Eyarun*:

> When I was the manager of Better Books [July 1965 onwards] … this reverend gentleman with his cassock came in. When he got inside the door, he went down on his knees as if he was going to pray. Instead he opened a suitcase and brought out all sorts of magazines and books that he had collected which he had come to show me.

The appeal was probably partly that Houédard's typestracts had dispensed with semantics in favour of a poetry of abstract visual effects, arguably more consummately and skilfully than any other work produced under the aegis of concrete

After discovering concrete, Cobbing also quickly became concerned with proving its ancient, trans-cultural origins. "People are always calling my poetry avant-garde.…Well … it's not; it is the most primitive type of poetry that you could possibly have … I want to establish its primitive roots" (*Composition and Performance* [12]). His connection to Houédard probably helped him to posit such roots. Besides his vast 1965 chronology, Houédard also wrote an "Introduction, Ancestry and Chronology" for Cobbing and Jandl's LP, undertaking a similar task in relation to sound poetry by backdating it to "trad folksong refrains: tralala rumtumtum patati-patata &c" ([11]). Cobbing's histories of concrete and sound lean heavily on Houédard's; these two timelines appear, for example, in augmented form in *Concerning Concrete Poetry*.

However, much of the visual concrete in *Eyearun* has little in common with Houédard's, beyond an urge towards wordlessness. It more clearly displays the influence of abstract expressionist painting, important to Cobbing from the early 1960s onwards, even after, as he recounted in the 1970 interview "Beyond the Word", he gave up painting in 1963. The summation of Cobbing's visual art career was a solo show at North Finchley Library in July-August 1963: an archived catalogue lists 52 works

produced from 1951 onwards; a press release containing a review by Nuttall asserts that Cobbing's work had evolved from "conventionally geometric" abstraction in the 1950s:

> [T]o the rather odd, ultra-sensitive wielding of paint which distinguishes his present style. These new pictures are … supercharged surfaces in which the geometric restriction imposed by the rectangle of the canvas itself is reduced to a minimum and one feels that the painting is exploding illimitably from the centre like the universe itself. The masters of this kind of painting are Wols and [Mark] Tobey. (*Press Release*)

Various characteristics of the *Eyearun* duplicator poems, notably the granular patterns spread across large areas by coagulation and incomplete coverage of ink, can also be assessed by recourse to Tobey's 1940s "white writing" series, for example. As Clement Greenberg noted in " 'American-Type' Painting" (1955), Tobey's "white writing" style involved "covering the picture surface with an even, largely undifferentiated system of uniform motifs that cause the result to look as though it could be continued indefinitely beyond the frame" (187). The calligraphic quality of those motifs also suggests the kind of image-language nexus hinted at by some of Cobbing's finer mark-making techniques, one of the qualities inviting oscillation between speech and sound in performance.

The setting for Cobbing's meeting with Houédard is also relevant. Cobbing began work at Better Books paperback department in January 1965, immediately after it opened: first under the management of Bill Butler, then under *International Times* editor Barry Miles. That July, Cobbing took over management himself, remaining in post until the department's closure in November 1967. During this period Better Books became a hub of counter-cultural activity, one of the "centres of the whole English movement" (Nuttall *Bomb Culture* 201). Its stock, presumably sourced by Cobbing, provided a comprehensive sweep of alternative literature, typified by "concrete poetry and American Beat Generation mimeo-magazines" (Miles *London Calling* 159). There were also poetry readings: besides Ginsberg's visit, Cobbing told Görtschacher, "the most exciting occasion … was when Ernst Jandl read there". Its functions as an exhibition and performance space led to similar connections with visual and performance art: "eventually", Cobbing states, "we had something going on every night of the week" (ibid.). The most notorious Better Books exhibition was the spring 1965 sTigma installation constructed by Bruce Lacey, John Latham, Keith and Heather Musgrove,

Nuttall, Criton Tomazos, David Trace and Nick Watkins, a grotesque walkthrough environment whose final section consisted of:

> A corridor of old clothes, a red cylinder, knee deep in feathers, a vaginal tunnel of inner tubes scented with Dettol through which the public had to crawl to get out [into] a womb-room with a plastic abortion nailed to the wall, a plethora of political and religious propaganda and a beaming photograph of David Jacobs. (Nuttall *Bomb Culture* 226)

Cobbing also staged events at Better Books during the 1966 Destruction in Art Symposium, whose influence upon his attitude to language is evident in the subtitle of one *Eyearun* duplicator print: "The Death of Language". More generally, the shop's atmosphere of transgression and prodigality provided the ambient context for *Eyearun's* creation, just as mid-renovation Glasgow had framed Morgan's concrete constructions.

*Eyearun*

*Eyearun* is an envelope of loose sheets, the first Writers Forum Folder. This collection partly shows Cobbing transferring the stylistic traits of *Sound Poems* onto the visual plane: like that collection, its primary qualities are a critical stance upon semantics, and a poetic grammar of abstract forms. The difference, besides the visual/sonic distinction, is that in some *Eyearun* poems, written language's most basic units, its syllables and graphemes, are broken up, an assault not yet exacted upon speech. These poems – the written equivalent of sound rather than phonic poetry – are discussed below. I then consider two of the collection's textual versions of sonic concrete poems, which utilise more extra-linguistic visual effects than those in *Sound Poems*, including overprinting, font distinction, and non-linear graphic arrangement. These kinds of performance cues inaugurated the move towards the more abstract sonic concrete of the late 1960s, contingent to a shifting text-performance relationship.

Cobbing's "Duplicatorprint: The Death of Language" is the most consummate and perhaps ascetic example of the broken-up written poetry just described. Two of the poem's corners are filled with white rectangles, vaguely resembling the ends of envelopes; dark circular patches suggest wax seals. Its other corners are black with ink, though one contains a small agglomeration of diagonal white lines which, on close

inspection, turn out to contain the stems and bowls of roman type: probably the last traces of a typed page saturated with duplicator ink, shielded by ridges in its surface. This is the sole concession to the conventions of the written page, besides the poem's production on a duplicator, a machine for reproducing text.[26] Together with the poem's title, this suggests a Metzger-inspired assault upon language, whose razed remains have been formed into an alternative grammar of abstract visual effects, appealing through stark textural and tonal variations. In interview with Upton, Cobbing stated: "I loved the qualities one could achieve on the Gestetner, from solid blacks to the most subtle greys"; thus perhaps pleasure in those effects outweighed aggression towards semantics as a compositional impulse.

The collection also contains three "typestracts". These works forward more contextualised critiques of semantics, and set up a more engaging interaction between image and text. Their source-materials are strips and squares of text cut from a tract on psychoanalysis and a war memoir, stencils from which were fed through a duplicator to create prints over which numerous other stencils were passed, often at 180 degrees, the resulting arrangements of text quadrilaterals then overlaid with larger letter-forms and diacritic marks from a transfer sheet.

"Typestract: Introduction/Conclusion" (fig. 2) – republished as *Typestract 2* (1969) – consists of five columns of overlaid or contiguous text, separated by a background of grey duplicator ink bleeding to white, flecked with black. This damage to pre-existing language suggests another blanket assault on semantics. Accordingly, the piece's initial appeal is purely visual and abstract, involving colour gradients, and the textures formed from overprinted type. However, the columns are also partly legible, allowing the poem's source-texts to be identified. This is surely deliberate, given the suggestiveness of those sources, identified by Willey as Walter C. Alvarez's *Incurable Physician: An Autobiography* (1963), and Denis Warner's *The Last Confucian: Vietnam, South-East Asia, and the West* (1963) (message to the author). The former is a doctor's autobiography whose final chapter, from which Cobbing exclusively selects, consists of a diatribe against Freudian psychoanalysis, "with its sometimes almost unintelligible gibberish", "a manifestation of the present day worship of the unintelligible" (248). The latter is an account of the anti-communist South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem's internecine overthrow and assassination in 1963, which destabilised the region. Warner criticises the American Embassy's insouciance to the coup, presenting the

various communist insurgencies in South-East Asia as a "carefully planned and skilfully executed plan to destroy Western economic power and influence" (304). Cobbing probably interpreted both texts as bearing unstated motives, Alvarez's rooted in an interpretation of mental illness as biological rather than environmental, Warner's in concern for Western military interests in South East Asia (motives in fact acknowledged by their respective authors). Cobbing visually imbricates the two texts, disrupting their semantic logic and suggesting the equivalence of the character types they manifest, both concerned with normalising their own functions by attributing dysfunction to a coherent external entity: the mentally ill; communist governance. A speculative reading of part of the first column proceeds as follows:

> e days onward,
> The underpass
> Troops attack
> fter his tremen-
> his early tene
> e maintaining
> .....
> ognized by the
> mother's birth
> ers is unclear
> blish that, find
> an armoured
> who were born
> the officer in
> ere born easily….

Phrases from Warner's text – "underpass", "troops attack" – bind with references to birth and motherhood from Alvarez's to loosely conflate military assault and medical pathology, suggesting the influence of Cobbing's associate R.D. Laing, who had asserted the brutality of conventional psychiatric diagnosis in *The Divided Self* (1960).

Cobbing is probably here pursuing the aims of cut-up technique as explained by Burroughs in *The Job* (1969): to expose textual motives hidden beneath the layer of direct statement which implanted themselves in the reader sub-rationally, "certain word combinations" producing "certain effects on the human nervous system" (Odier 12). As Gysin's *Minutes to Go* title-poem asserts (see page 312):

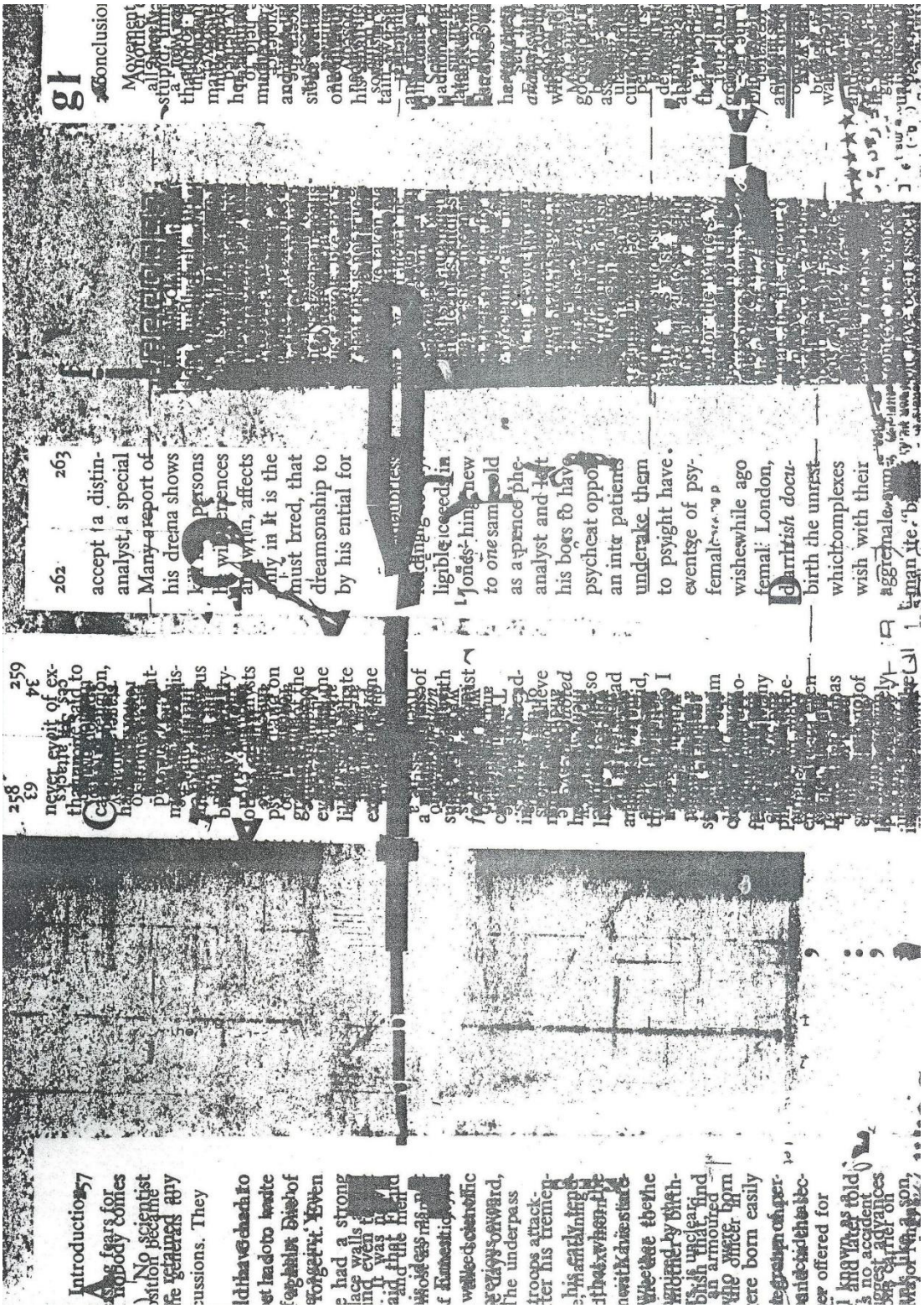


Fig. 2. “Typestract: Introduction/Conclusion”.

> you will soon see just what they really are
> saying this is the terminal method for
> finding the truth…." (5)

That Cobbing was employing cut-up method is suggested especially by the third column, which comprises the aligned left and right-hand edges of an Alvarez double-spread: a take on the related technique of "fold-in", whereby "a page of text … is folded down the middle and placed on another page, the composite text … then read across" (Burroughs qtd. in Mottram *William Burroughs* 39). Putting aside the slightly paranoiac overtones of Burroughs's explanation of the uses of cut-up method, Cobbing's deployment of it renders the typestracts not mere blanket assaults upon language, but contextualised critiques of language's misuse in specific social and political scenarios. The interaction between reading and looking thus solicited, moreover, pushes them into a multimedia idiom generating something of the impression of intermediality Cobbing was beginning to seek.

Importantly, such poems were probably not yet intended for performance. There are no contemporaneous recordings of them, and Houédard's introduction demarcates poems to be heard – "eyear", "eye/ear" – from "eye" poems, to be viewed, including the typestracts. This implies that absence of linear, phonetic language was still beyond the remit of Cobbing's sonic concrete, suggesting his greater attachment to certain traditional conventions of poetry in it spoken format. However, Houédard's other categories describe poems in which extra-linguistic visual effects do play into performance: the absence of a mere "ear" category is conspicuous. These poems include "Worm" (fig. 3), a revisualisation of Cobbing's "Meditation", and a triptych version of "Are Your Children Safe in the Sea?", a comparable re-envisagement of "A Line from the Observer". "Worm" recasts the earlier piece in six vertical lines, each corresponding to two in the 1954 poem, which burrow down in close curves, generating what Houédard called an "inverted delta sense of wobble" ("Bob Cobbing: Troubadour and Poet" 5). The lines are overprinted a few millimetres off – a perennial authorial manoeuvre, suggesting echo or vibration – and converge on a small horizontal strip formed from three interpenetrating iterations of the title-word: "W OW R OM WRO RMM". The poem's layered visual allusions include worm-trails, bore-holes, peristalsis, seismic movement, and, alongside words like "interpenetrate" and "intrude", sex and putrefaction.

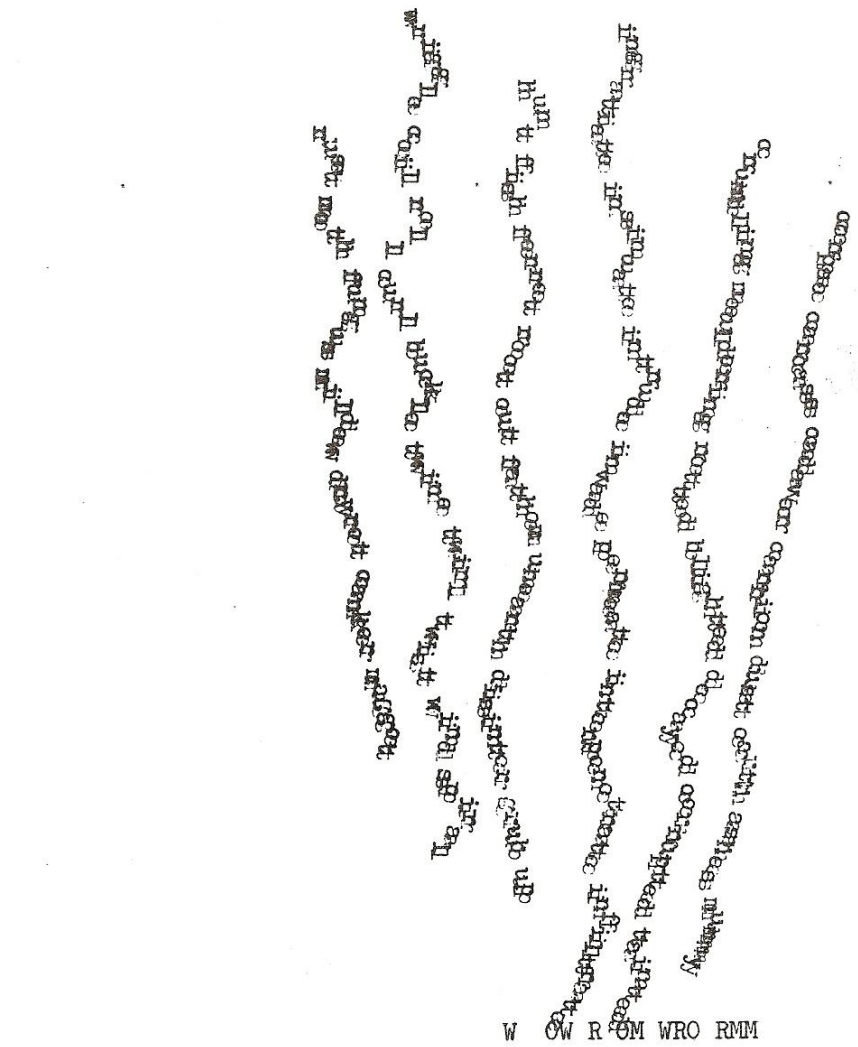



Fig. 3. “Worm”.

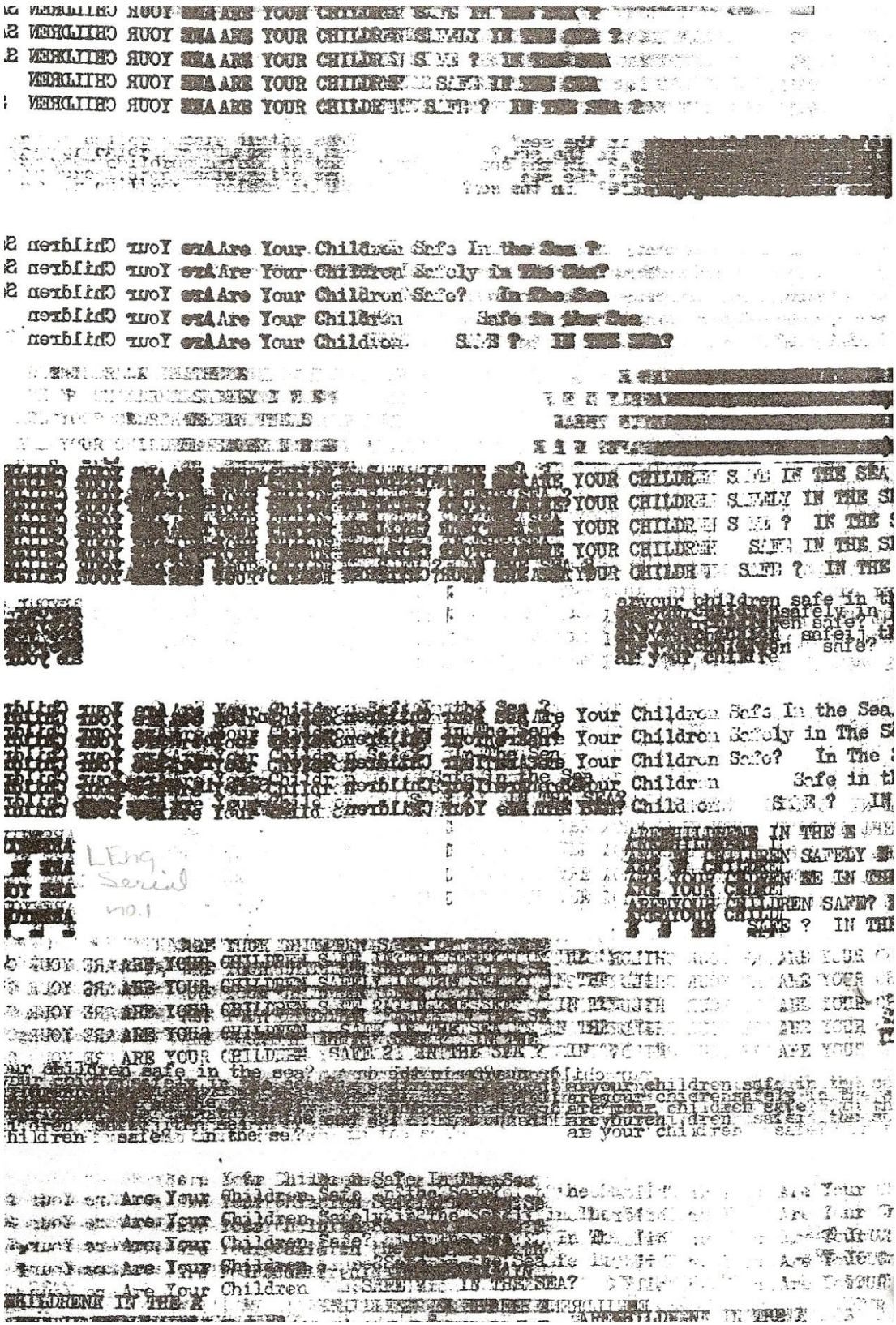
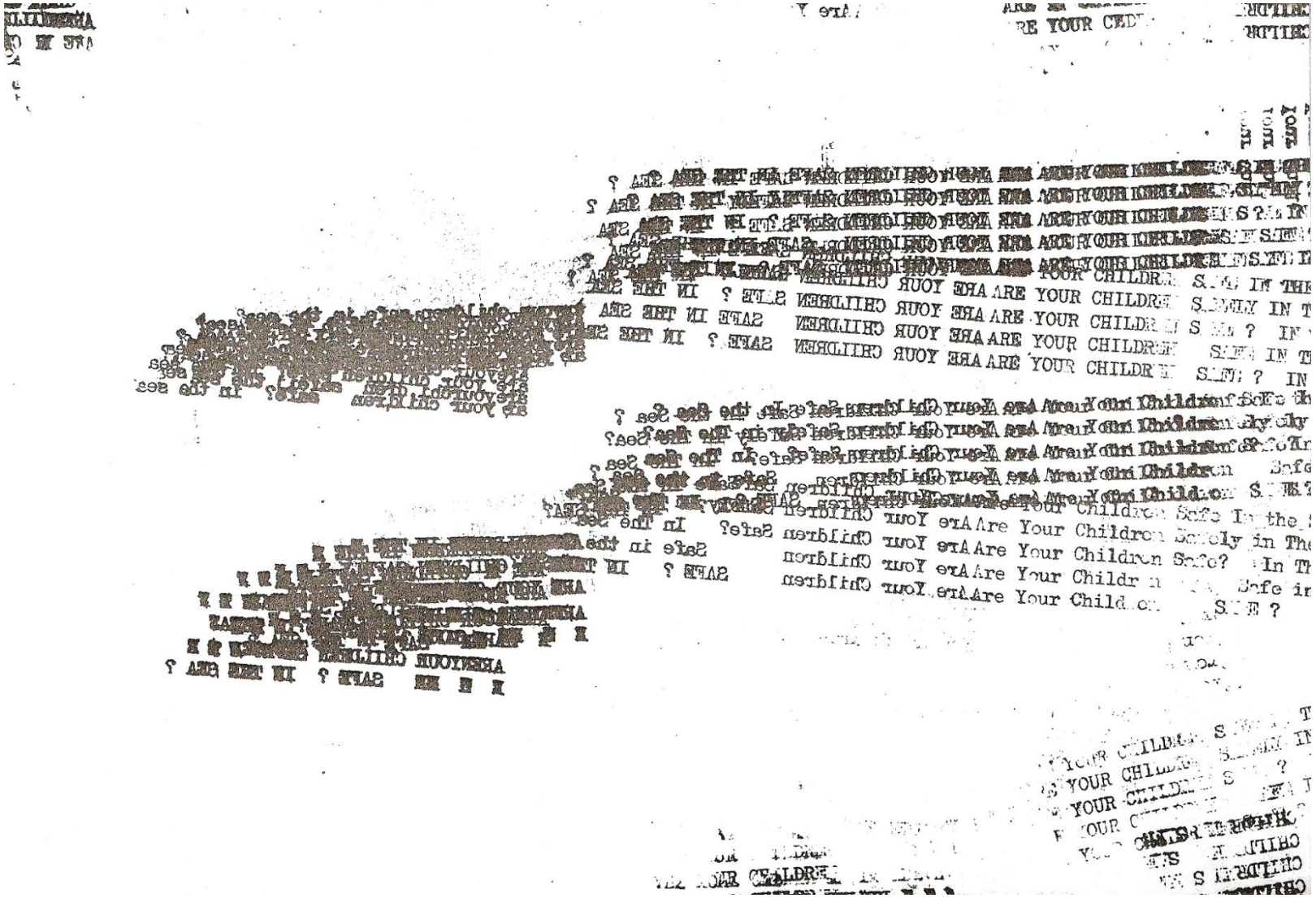


Fig. 4. From “Are Your Children Safe in the Sea?”


Are Your Children Safe?
Are Your Children Safe?
Are Your Children Safe?
Are Your Children Safe?

These abstract visual allusions, moreover, were designed for conversion into improvised sonic equivalents. Cobbing and Lockwood's 1966 studio version of "Worm" attempted this through an exaggerated, fricative vocal quality, partly involving a Chopin-like – though non-mechanical – deceleration of words, suggestive of drilling or burrowing. Abstraction did not yet entail sonic representations of non-phonetic visual marks – the visual version of "Worm" is still legible – but lack of linear order might also have been carried across into the sound versions: the temporal relationship between the horizontal and vertical lines, for example, is unclear. The 1966 recording actually maintains the order of the 1954 piece, suggesting some lingering attachment to linearity, but a periodically overlaid second track, featuring the word "WORM" spoken at different speeds, with different timbres, makes a concession to the temporal simultaneity suggested by spatial juxtaposition. The necessarily individual route of any such transferral of visual into sonic effects, moreover, converted single poems into potentially endlessly multiplying entities.

"Are Your Children Safe in the Sea?" (fig. 4) further breaks down linearity and legibility: rectangular imprints of Cobbing's 1960 poem are arranged in columnar or cross-hatched patterns which repel linear advancement. Interestingly, a 1966 recording of the poem – again with Lockwood – also maintains the order of the earlier version, but vocal sections are interspersed with snippets of abstract tape-sound, vaguely suggestive of sub-aquatic acoustics: another orrespondence with visual abstraction.

## Sound Moving Away From Text: 1966-68

Cobbing's next collection, excluding *Chamber Music* (1967) – his contribution to Mayer's Futura series – was *Kurrirrurriri* (1967). Described by Mottram as Cobbing's "first major printed work", *Kurrirrurriri* actually largely belongs in the *Sound Poems* stage of creative development, containing mainly graphically unadorned transcriptions of sonic concrete poems, which emphasise speech's material aspects without eroding its phonic bases ("A Prosthetics of Poetry" 116). Many borrow from tribal languages – often via Edward B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871), a foundational tract of cultural evolutionist anthropology – generating the impression of lost or rarified states of communication while simultaneously rendering modular sonic effects.[27]

However, the period from 1966 to 1968 also marked Cobbing's further development of his poetry's sonic dimensions beyond the mere recitation of text. There were two aspects to this process, involving the different possibilities facilitated by live performance and recording. Cobbing's "Sound Sequence for Six/Sixty/Six Hundred/or Six Thousand Voices", from *Kurrirrurriri,* attests to the former range of freedoms, revealing how his performances began to incorporate improvisation and audience interaction. His recordings, meanwhile, began to utilise the studio's technological capacities more extensively, resulting in sonic concrete poems with no textual basis. Cobbing and Lockwood's tape-poem trilogy of "Khrajrej" (1967), "Stip-Step" and "Klowkukulan" (1968) exemplifies this development. These unmoorings of poem from text predicate Cobbing's creation of non-phonetic visual concrete poems as scores for similarly unmoored sonic versions. The two aforementioned works are considered below, following preambles regarding context and influences.

Cobbing's increasing use of live improvisation and audience collaboration partly reflects the sense of affinity between poetry and pop music prevalent in certain 1960s literary milieus. In *The Society of the Poem*, Jonathan Raban interpreted this as one allegiance among many – including the drugs scene, jazz, and beatnik or "troubadour" culture – through which poets sought to "uproot the poem from the topsoil of its middle-class, continuous historical context" (79):

> By the 1950s British poetry … seem[ed] inextricably rooted in a social establishment and centre that was rapidly turning into an uninhabitable house[,]…pop music provided … an enticing counter-analogue … a form whose audience cut straight across the social hierarchy, whose values were fluid and independent of any socially or historically based tradition. (83-84)

Tracing the development of pop-poetics across the late-1950s and early-1960s, through "concerts of poetry and jazz" like those organised by Cobbing, and the "upsurge in political balladry sparked off by the Aldermaston marches" – Mitchell and Christopher Logue are referenced – Raban cites the 1965 Albert Hall reading as the apex of its growth, "poetry's first pop concert" (85). He associates pop music, "with its emphasis on the moment of performance", with improvisatory and interactive potential: "the music was not an impersonal product to be conveyed from the artist to the audience; it happened, as when the Who smashed up their equipment, as part of the total dynamics

of the situation itself" (84). Cobbing probably saw his sonic concrete poetry, with its divergence from semantic sense, and easily graspable rhythmic and sonic emphases, as uniquely able to generate such dynamics. He would also have witnessed their spontaneous materialisation during Jandl's performance of "Schützengraben" at the Albert Hall, documented in *Wholly Communion*, its closing phrases swamped in a roar of collaborative audience noise.[28] Cobbing's notes on concrete poetry for a late-1960s radio broadcast suggest such a sense of its cultural value, and the related influence of Jandl's performance: "a) International. Jandl at AH./ b)all ages/ all intelligences, part of the process which is bridging the gap between Pop & Highbrow, Beatles & Stockhausen" (*An ABC in Sound*). Tellingly, Raban recounts a 1968 performance by Cobbing as exemplary of the dynamics of "poem-as-event" generated by pop aesthetics.

Cobbing's "Sound Sequence" exemplifies his pop-influenced sense of the potential of collaboration and improvisation: characteristics also connected to aleatoric score performance, of course. This poem was probably composed for the so-called New Moon Festival held at the Albert Hall on June 18, 1966, a year after the first reading. Its textual version epitomises the invitation to improvisation and collaboration increasingly ingrained in Cobbing's written poetry, though by written cue rather than ambiguous graphic notation. It comprises two columns headed "CHORUS A" and "CHORUS B", for reading aloud or responding to simultaneously:

| CHORUS A | CHORUS B |
|---|---|
| mutama matama m'muta | |
| mumatama m'mata mu mu | |
| mutama matama m'muta | |
| mumatuma m'mata m'mu mu | |
| matama MATAM m'muta | ata matuma m'mata |
| mumaTUMA m'mata m'mu mu | umatama m'muta ma |
| mutama matama m'muta | atuma m'mata muta |
| mumatuma m'mata mu mu | ama m'mutama tamu |
| . | |
| . – continuous | ra m'mata mutamama |
| . – repetition with | umata matuma m'ma |
| . – adlib variation | atu matama m'muta |
| . – sometimes louder | amatuma m'mata mu |
| . sometimes softer | |
| . – but let choir B | atama m'muta mata |
| . – be heard | uma m'matamu tama |
| . – sometimes more | a m'muta matumama |
| . – sometimes less | amatu matama m'mu |

….

. louder when they are
. silent between
. sections….
([11])

Various *Sound Poems,* including "T", "H" and "I", are subsequently staggered across the two columns, a formal recycling itself exemplary of Cobbing's increasing emphasis on reformulating individual poems. The piece closes on a Marinetti-esque percussive sequence for Chorus A: "timpa tampa/ tump tup/ tumbuk timno/ tumbak tamno" ([11-13]). Periodic gaps indicate passages of silence for one chorus or another; lines such as "with variations of volume and tempo" function as open-ended dynamic prompts.

Clearly, this text invites performance, as the frequent presence of voice prompts in place of the poem itself makes clear. Such performance, moreover, should clearly be significantly chance-based, as suggested by the demand for multiple performers, all likely to respond to cues differently, and the ambiguity of written directives such as "with ad lib variations" ([11]). An incensed *Daily Mail* article concerning the New Moon Festival, focused on the performance of Cobbing's poem, suggests that audience interaction and improvisation were key aspects of its live rendering:

> Highspot of the evening's entertainment was to have been a Sound Mass for 2,000 people by poet Hob Cobbing [sic.] that began: "Mutama matama m'muta … "….It was drowned by organised hecklers. As Mr. Cobbing struggled to read the ten minute poem people danced wildly in the arena and played musical instruments. (Walker "Poets, Never Again, Says Albert Hall Man")

The term "organised hecklers" suggests that copies of the poem were presented in advance to audience members, who were perhaps divided into two choruses. Thus not only was audience interaction solicited, but the distinction between performer and listener was broken down, collapsing my own categories of performer improvisation and audience interaction into one category of "group improvisation". During this performance, such improvisation was probably extensive, given the ambiguous textual prompts and the mere size of the crowd, which Walker placed at 2,000. Cobbing's "struggle" to finish the poem certainly suggests a chaotic proliferation of voices, testament to the widening formal gulf between his poems in their textual and live versions.

His development of the recorded poem related to an increasing affiliation with French sound poetry, manifested in various improvised 1968 collaborations, including "Computer Poem", with François Dufrêne, and "Vive Rabelais", with Chopin. Cobbing also forged a connection with European sound poetry's other base in Sweden, culminating in his involvement with the seven international sound poetry festivals held in Stockholm (1968-74).

The increased French influence is clear in Cobbing's use of magnetic tape to overlay vocal sources and amplify non-verbal mouth sounds in recorded poems from this period, including "Marvo Movie Natter" (1967); and in his use of non-vocal sound sources, notably in the aforementioned trilogy. This technique is particularly associable with Bernard Heidsieck's 1960s "poempartitions", in which ambient recordings of urban environments are interspersed with fragments of speech and non-linguistic vocal utterance. Cobbing's adaptation of such techniques comprised something like a turn from phonic to sound poetry. His 1969 statement "Poetry for a New Age", an assessment of the value of tape-treatment printed in the University of East Anglia student magazine *Mandate*, suggests French influences:[29]

> Our human voices extend the range of the tape recorder's abilities by their demands upon it. Conversely, the tape-recorder's treatment of the voice teaches the human new tricks of rhythm and tone, power and subtlety.…Materials are the micro-particles of the human voice which amplified, possibly transposed in speed or pitch, superimposed one, two or many times, treated perhaps with filter echo or chopper, shaped maybe by editing, result in a piece no naked voice could achieve; though I can conceive of a choir of voices which might attain to similar flights.

Interestingly, Cobbing's assertion that the human voice could actually match the tape-recorder's expressive prowess presages its later abandonment in favour of the "naked voice"; but its centrality at this stage is clear.

The influence of Swedish "text-sound" poetry, often characterised by the permutation or incremental manipulation of repeated passages of speech – as in Sten Hanson's "Che" (1968) – seems slimmer; but Cobbing's presentation of poems as taped documents per se attests to it. Whereas French sound poets generally saw poems as existing either in performance or recording, many Swedish poets saw the recording as the definitive formal realisation, as the fourth imperative of Hansen's critical statement

"My Approach to Text-Sound Composition" reveals: "[t]he product should be presented in the form of a tape intended primarily for the media of radio and gramophone and not as a manuscript or score".

A recording of Cobbing's unreleased tape-poem trilogy is stored in the British Library. This piece is characterised both by textural manipulation of the voice, and by use of non-vocal sound sources which, as Mottram noted in "A Prosthetics of Poetry", bring it "nearer Stockhausen's music than existing poetic forms' (125). For reasons of space, I will focus on the final part, "Klowkukulan" (1968). This section opens on a recording of Cobbing repeating the words "Sing Ku Ku Nu" in a rising minor-key refrain, suggestive of liturgical chanting. Exclamatory vocal noises are then introduced, with extreme echo applied, from which an inhuman-seeming throbbing is incrementally generated, extended over the following minutes. A minute into that phase, a recording of "Wan Do Tree" from *Kurrirrurriri* is faded in, its lower tones artificially emphasised. After three minutes, the echo develops into a two-note tonal sequence, then back into throbbing, at which point highly distorted speech sounds – extracted from recordings of poem-performances, conversation, laughter – become peripherally audible. After around four minutes and thirty seconds, a single note of feedback begins to dominate, exemplifying what Mottram calls "accident due to the partly unpredictable behaviour of electronic apparatus … as in Cage's *Cartridge Music*"; echoed speech sounds persist in the background (125). Around a minute later, high interjectory notes and laughter intrude, while echoed voices again seamlessly develop into rhythmic sequences of notes. At this point, Cobbing can be heard addressing a crowd, probably introducing a poem. After six minutes and twenty seconds, snippets of the "Five Cornwall Poems" from *Kurrirrurriri* are periodically interjected, swiftly drowned each time in tonal, echo-derived vocal rhythms. Buzzing and crackling sounds suggestive of an unearthed cable are then introduced, interspersed with clapping, singing, banging, and snatches of sped-up music, before Middle-Eastern folk music is phased in, along with the sound of a stringed instrument accelerated to the point of pixelation. A recitation in a female French voice follows before, after nine minutes, the refrain "Sing Ku Ku Nu" fades back in to close the poem.

This poem's most striking formal characteristic, besides its re-use of existing poems, is the segueing of speech into tonal pattern, exemplary of Cobbing's simultaneous degradation of semantics and inauguration of a grammar of abstract

effects. More broadly, the piece shows Cobbing embracing a pronounced abstraction of form at a sonic rather than visual level, creating a piece which is, by any conventional distinction, music. Besides showcasing the capacities of the recording studio, such pieces reflect the absence of a guiding text; but they also predicate Cobbing's development of new forms of "text" which could serve as catalysts for similarly extra-linguistic sonic concrete poems.

## Vocalising Visuals, 1968-70: Context and Influences

Cobbing's most striking contribution to concrete poetry and, as Sheppard notes, "the unique distinction of his work by the early 1970s" (221), was his production of visual poems exceeding the boundaries of vocalisable language as scores for vocalisation, a process compelled by an insight professed to Mottram in 1977: "[e]verything I see I can hear" (*Composition and Performance* [14]). The significance of this development is clear from the hyper-acceleration of Cobbing's publication roster at this time, to a level sustained until his death in 2002.

This process radically increased the remit of abstraction in Cobbing's work: by jettisoning phonetic sound for representations of non-phonetic marks, thus further breaking down language's sonic as well as visual bases, and, because those marks had no predetermined sonic equivalents, by inviting multiple versions of single poems, thus sacrificing any notion of definitive form. It also fed the transcendentalism of Cobbing's poetics: by finding sounds for visual forms, that is, Cobbing could imply that concrete poets were able to divine trans-sensory formal relationships between vision and sound, or even synaesthetically transfer data from one sense to another, thereby surpassing not only language, but the boundaries of any one medium or related sense. This intermedial poetry would become the nominal product and proof of the a-temporal human essence he sought, and thus the basis for new, equitable forms of communication and socialisation. The influences on this development, including "happenings", aleatoric score performances and auto-destructive art, can be related to the broader shift in the meaning of "concrete poetry" outlined in chapter two: these factors are assessed in turn.

My description of Cobbing's poetics as "intermedial" invokes the North American phenomenon of "happenings", which the term "intermedia" was partly coined to define. According to Dick Higgins, the "happening" developed seamlessly out

of experiments across various media in the 1950s-60s, including his own chance-based theatre scripts, Nam June Paik and Benjamin Patterson's experimental scores, and Al Hansen's "graphic notation experiments" ("Intermedia" [3]). It was thus "an intermedium, an uncharted land that lies between collage, music and the theater. It is not governed by rules; each work determines its own medium and form according to its needs." (ibid.) Early happenings were often multimedia performance events, sometimes designed to incite audience confusion regarding the point where the event overlapped with real life. Their influence upon Cobbing's poetry is suggested by his own experiments with the genre: in September 1963, a week after the UK's first "happening" at the 1963 Edinburgh Festival – staged by Charles Marowitz, Mark Boyle and Ken Dewey, organised by John Calder, and infamously featuring a naked model in a shopping trolley – Cobbing and HAT staged their own, at Hampstead's New End Gallery. This event, climaxing in a mock-surgical operation on a wellington boot, was the first of many held in libraries and galleries across Finchley, and from 1965, at Better Books.[30] We can partly interpret Cobbing's late-1960s poetry as an attempt to transpose the spirit of the happening onto the poetic medium, soliciting performances which determined their own medium and form, foregoing the pre-existing conventions of text-speech and performer-audience relationships. Cobbing would also have appreciated the happening's anarchistic socio-political imperatives, as described by Higgins:

> [S]eparation between media arose in the renaissance[,]…characteristic of the … social thought – categorizing and dividing society into nobility … , untitled gentry, artisans, serfs and landless workers – which we call the Feudal conception of the Great Chain of Being….[T]he social problems that characterize our time, as opposed to the political ones, no longer allow a compartmentalized approach. We are approaching the dawn of a classless society, to which separation into rigid categories is absolutely irrelevant. ("Intermedia" [1])

This vision of "classless society" is comparable to Cobbing's invocations of communication stripped of the manipulation attendant to power relations.

The development of aleatoric scores by American composers such as Cage and Feldman from the 1940s onwards was one antecedent of the happening and, along with the uptake of such techniques by British composers such as Cornelius Cardew in the 1960s, another influence on, or analogue to, this evolution in Cobbing's poetry.[31] The

correlation is clearest with aleatoric scores using open-ended graphic notation rather than, for example, lists of constants and variables, as the source of their ambiguity. An early example cited by Nyman is Earle Browne's *December 1952* (1952), whose score comprises "31 horizontal and vertical blocks, of different lengths and thicknesses spaced over a single sheet[,]…to be filled or represented by any type or combination of sounds, according to any chosen timescale" (57-58). A more chronologically and culturally proximate example is Cardew's extraordinary *Treatise* (1967), whose notation comprises almost two hundred pages of kinetically mutating geometrical shapes and linear arrangements, partly extrapolated from the shape of the musical stave.[32] This emptying of the musical score of pre-constraining cue resulted in the same radical contingency of form to performance, and the same speculative mapping of sound to vision, as Cobbing's transgression of the phonetic boundaries of writing in poems for performance. Cobbing acknowledges the comparison in "What the Tape-Recorder Teaches the Poet" (1985), describing his visual concrete poems as "notations for performance", "as in the case of music".

The idea of formal multiplicity attendant to this development can also be framed in the context of the 1966 Destruction in Art Symposium, organised by Gustav Metzger and John Sharkey.[33] Held in London on September 9-11, with additional events and lectures throughout the summer, Metzger summarised the symposium's aims as follows:

> In the context of the possible wipe-out of civilization, the study of aggression in man, and the psychological, biological and economic drives to war, is possibly the most urgent work facing man. A central idea of Destruction in Art Symposium was to isolate the element of destruction in new art forms, and to discover any links with destruction in society. ("Excerpts from Selected Papers Presented at the 1966 Destruction in Art Symposium")

Besides entailing a critique of destructive forces within world politics – and, Metzger implies, their subconscious mimesis through existing art-forms – producing art which did not outlive its first presentation pointedly placed it outside monetary exchange systems. These ideals were manifested in various events involving the destruction or self-destruction of their constitutive materials, many held at Better Books: Robin Page's performance piece *KRAW!*, which involved digging a hole in the shop basement, and was halted when he burst a water pipe (Miles 154); Jean Toche's *Typewriter Destruction* event, and *An Evening with Ralph Ortiz*, during which Ortiz played a piano with an axe

(dates from Metzger "Preliminary Report");[34] Cobbing himself gave a presentation on September 10 entitled *The Destruction of the DIAS Exhibition* (ibid.). Besides his probable empathy with its simulations of military and social violence and evasion of the art market, the influence of DIAS on Cobbing's work lay in the notion of generating multiple transient impressions of a single artwork through incremental decomposition. The influence is suggested by an event Cobbing staged during DIAS – probably the September 10 piece – during which, as Bill Griffiths notes in the introduction to *Vowels and Consequences* (1985), "an announcement of the DIAS programme was stencilled and gradually destroyed on the duplicator, providing over 500 different images" (4); a similar series of variations on *Typestract 1* was created the same night.[35] These processual works seem inceptive of Cobbing's re-conception of the "poem" as a potentially limitless range of variations on an inceptive graphic form; although these particular variation were visual rather than sonic.

Importantly, Cobbing's incorporation of these influences did not indicate a solitary movement away from the concrete idiom: to some extent, it typified the style's incorporation into a broader wave of artistic experiment concerned with occupying the liminal territories between media, and collapsing inherited aesthetic conventions. The catholic editorship of Solt and Williams's anthologies exemplified this shift, as did the hectoring letter which Dick Higgins, Williams's publisher, sent to Stephen Bann on October 6, 1967 regarding the generic and formal strictures of his own anthology:

> [T]o call it a horse's ass anthology would be to gild the lily with compliments ….The introduction is bristling with factual errors,...the designs are flabby and ill-conceived[,]…not to research and dig out more of the marvellous, hidden works of the movement! Just to "anthologize" from what is already available! And on top of it all, in a movement which is profoundly international and in which poets fundamentally make their own language structures, to break it down into latin, germanic and english sections, like man, come off it!!!

Cobbing's own attempts to redraw concrete's historical and stylistic parameters reflect his involvement with the attempted critical reorientation implicit in Higgins's invective. In "Some Myths of Concrete Poetry" (1972), he and Mayer set out to debunk the "myth" that concrete "sprang suddenly into being in 1955" as a "pure, constructivist movement", and the subsidiary myth that "the only worthwhile concrete poetry in Britain has come from the Scots" (28). They also attacked "the myth of the separation

of sound poetry from … 'concrete poetry proper' " which, if "one reads Fahlström" or "realises the significance … of Hugo Ball, Hausmann, Schwitters and Albert-Birot … can no longer be sustained" (29).

The sea-change, at least in its North American aspect, is epitomised by Higgins's description of concrete in "Towards the 1970s" as an "intermedium,...between poetry and the fine arts", a statement with little connection to São Paulo or Ulm (2). Mottram's 1977 essay *Towards Design in Poetry*, the projected introduction to *Concerning Concrete Poetry*, also describes this new concrete poetry:

> Concrete poetry is part of the developments in conceptual, visual and sculptural art, and in music; the essentially interfacial nature of these developments has been clear for some years now….Within this sphere of action, the poem is more clearly than ever materials for performance. The poetic event is not the text on the page, to be subject to academic analyses as if it were complete. (9)

The ethical and political imperatives of this work were generally more anarchistic than Gomringer's visions of evolutionary linguistic reduction, as Mottram's descriptions of artistic experience unconstrained by convention reflects: "[t]o be possessed by a poem or a performance, however brief the catharsis may be, strikes terror to the leisure class because, like the presence of the new, it lies outside the expenditure of energy on money, property, comfort and disciplinarian hierarchy" (33).

*So: Six Sound Poems, Octo, Whisper Piece, Why Shiva Has Ten Arms, Kwatz*

Cobbing's development of visual concrete poems into scores for sonic performances was a gradual process, difficult to plot. Sheppard notes that Steve Dwoskin's typographical setting of Cobbing's "T" poem in 1966, with font distinctions indicating crescendos and diminuendos, "may well have been the impulse" (220). In "A Prosthetics of Poetry" Mottram suggested a point of consolidation around 1970, when Cobbing discarded the descriptions "concrete" and "sound", instead adopting the Swedish term "sound-text", to describe poems "anchored to or launched from a text" (107-08). These statements suggest a feasible time-frame, but I track the process over a shorter period, comparing the poetry and poetics of five mainly consecutive collections:

*So: Six Sound Poems* (1968), *Octo*, *Whisper Piece, Why Shiva Has Ten Arms* (1969), and *Kwatz* (1970).

At this stage, it should be acknowledged that it is impossible to critically validate the notion of integral or self-evident qualitative relationships between visual and sonic forms, either involving methods of formal transference unprecedented by convention, or transmogrifications of sight into sound. This is because shared, thus conventional, sign systems are a prerequisite of meaningful literary criticism, rather than because either process can be comprehensively disproven. However, Andrew Duncan, in a vituperative 1992 review of a Writers Forum anthology, did contest the idea that new relationships between visual and sonic data could be forged in performance, arguing that the linear nature of spatiotemporal cognition made clean breaks from previous expressive associations impossible:

> One of the ideals of the group is a literary system with 'no expectations'….This is impossible in view of the serial nature of language. The first half of a sentence is present as a memory in the second half, interprets it, and is by then already the past. There is no no expectations. ("The Material Practice of Bad Writing" 110)

In fact, this account still seems to allow the possibility of incremental development of new sound-sense associations, precisely through what Duncan calls "fitting new data into existing patterns": the patterns themselves are surely altered through that recuperation (ibid.); indeed, without some such process, no new sign systems could ever be mastered. However, Duncan does convincingly suggest a downscaling of ambitions for the "newness" of sound in performance.

In any case, at a communicable level, the relationship between visual concrete poems and their sonic versions involved various conventional auditory associations of visual forms. Peter Manson states that Cobbing was reluctant to discuss his own performance methods, perhaps because he did not assign them any particular validity (personal interview). But in a filmed interview with Judy Merriman (1985), Cobbing described his performances as "just a matter of imagining the equivalence in dance or in sound of the object of the poem that one is interpreting", extrapolating the idea largely by recourse to dance, although that summation suggests sonic responses would be equivalent:

> The marks on the page will have a certain rhythm to them, and that rhythm is the same … [as] you can get into your dancing movements. Then the strength of the line, or the blackness of the image could make quite a lot of difference,...if you've got a very strong line you want a strong movement, if you've got a soft hazy line you can make a softer movement....You can think of a letter as an abstract painting as well as a letter which can be sounded with a conventional letter-sign. So you get an interplay between the two: you can read a poem for the shape of the letter, an "s" for instance can become a sort of snake-like creature on the page, or the "o" can become an egg that grows and bursts …, as well as interpreting it as an "o" and an "s". (Cobbing and Fencott)

The account seems deliberately non-definitive but one might posit three categories, illustrative rather than exhaustive, of sonic representation of visuals: firstly, conventional auditory equivalents for abstract visual effects, involving analogies between size, darkness or thickness of visual form and volume or timbre of sound, or between line curvature and sonic rhythm; secondly, auditory effects associable with abstract pictorial effects, including the pictographic hints of letters; thirdly, conventional phonetic interpretations of letters, entailing the possibility of speech. These potential performance methods are referred back to during the following readings, which do not always include accounts of particular performances: partly due to lack of extant recordings, partly because many of Cobbing's poems also exist in several visual versions, so recordings cannot be assumed to relate to the piece under discussion.

Before proceeding, it is also worth reiterating that the element of Cobbing's poetry authorially envisaged as intermedial actually operated through the close alignment of media pertaining to the same sense. When this was achieved, either in visual or sonic form, the resultant sense of flicker between media became both an icon or apparition of intermedial sense, and a reminder of the common roots of signs in pre-significatory matter, and thus of their non-definitiveness; although the former effect prevailed in the late 1960s.

*So*, the fourth Writers Forum Folder, contains three graphically altered versions of sonic concrete poems whose unadorned textual versions appeared in *Kurrirrurriri*: "Wan Do Tree", " 'M" – part of an "Ejaculatory Poem" – and "Alphabet of Fishes", one of "Five Cornwall Poems" composed for the June 1967 festival Poem—Image—Symbol at Falmouth School of Art. Dwoskin's "T" was also first published in this collection, as "Tan", along with two new poems. Cobbing's introduction unprecedentedly describes these visual concrete poems as performance prompts: "this

published score may be the starting point for (your, my) anyone's vocal interpretation/ the poem exists in many forms aural and visual/ becomes many different poems". His sense of the resultant abstraction and multiplicity of poetic form – including potentially multiple visual versions – is clear. Cobbing also asserted that the poems' visual features were responses to the forms they assumed in performance: "the pattern of sound which is the sound poem often makes an interesting visual pattern on the page". This confirms the importance of improvised or textless sonic concrete poems as precedents for Cobbing's development of visual poems as scores for similar works.

This collection's visual effects are mainly limited to the expressive use of font, foregoing the typewritten duplicator stencils of *Kurrirrurriri*; "Alphabet of Fishes" contains illustrative images. But the general absence of independent extra-linguistic marks or non-linear visual constructions reflects the range of developments still to come. These font effects relate to performance, as in "Tan", where differences in letter size and weight correlate with distinctions in line length and linear position in the poem-as-read, directing sonic effects in terms of relationships between size and volume, and between weight or texture and timbre. Similarly, "M" (fig.5) comprises five impressions of non-semantic vocal utterance in a neat column of roman font, the typography directing performance away from the *Kurrirrurriri* sequence's allusions to bodily expulsion towards associations of scholarly orthography which jar with the sounds' bestial associations. This visual treatment perhaps indicates the censorial nature of orthography, which tends to eradicate the non-functional aspects of speech; it would perhaps be interpretable in performance by contrasts between the mannerisms of sensible speech and nonsensical vocal noise. This postulated transference would involve interpreting the allusive shapes of letters, in this case associative rather than pictorial.

*Octo* (1969) was the fifth Writers Forum Folder, and Cobbing's eighth publication, containing eight poems: hence the name. It reflects a further development of the performable visual element, using linguistic marks – repeated phrases, chunks of found text – as a painterly or pattern-like substance, rendering them effectively extra-linguistic and erasing linearity; although patches of legible writing remain. The folder contains four poems in two versions each, again testifying to Cobbing's visual as well as sonic reformulations of his work. That several visual versions of one poem could exist meant that, although visual poems were granted relatively hypostatic value by their conversion into sonic poems rather than vice versa, particular visual texts could not be

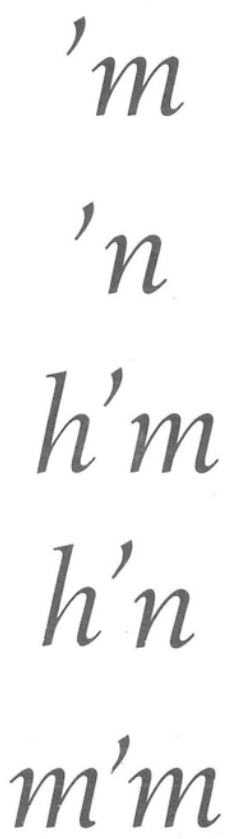



Fig. 5. " 'M".

ascribed definitional primacy. "Marvo Movie Natter", the first of Cobbing's "Whisper Piece" sonic concrete poems, was originally the soundtrack to Jeff Keen's eponymous 1967 film. The two visual versions in *Octo* (fig. 6) contain rough, almost chequered patterns formed from typewritten text at the tops and bottoms of square sheets, between which more sparsely distributed letters migrate in concentric or swirling patterns. Parts of the poems are heavily overlaid using duplicator stencils, and largely illegible. Legible areas are mainly composed from different parts of the title-text, a rebarbatively repetitive gesture further diverting attention towards visual form. The motile-seeming middle sections generate optical associations of ripples in sound or water, while allowing a range of words or sounds to be picked out from legible strings

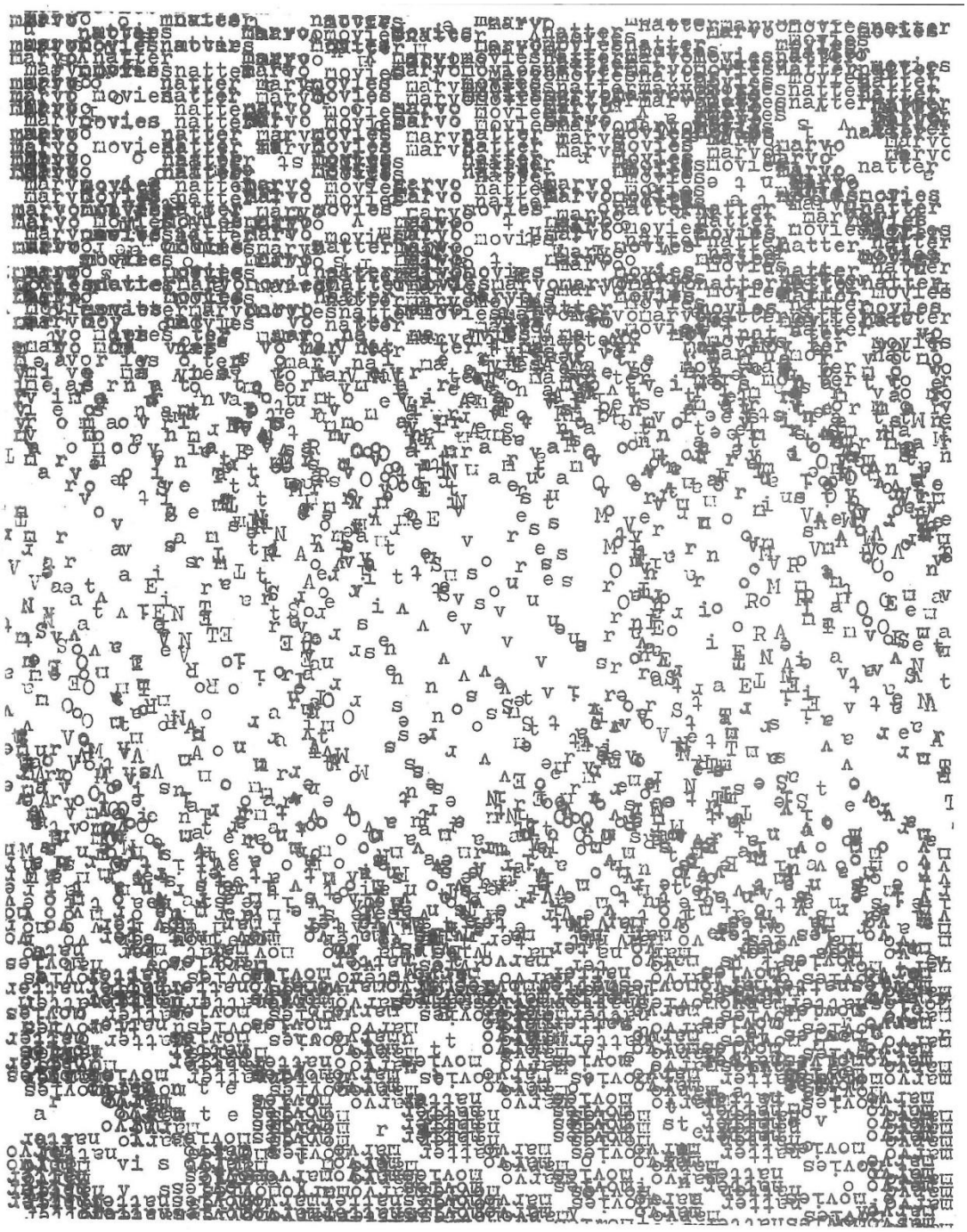
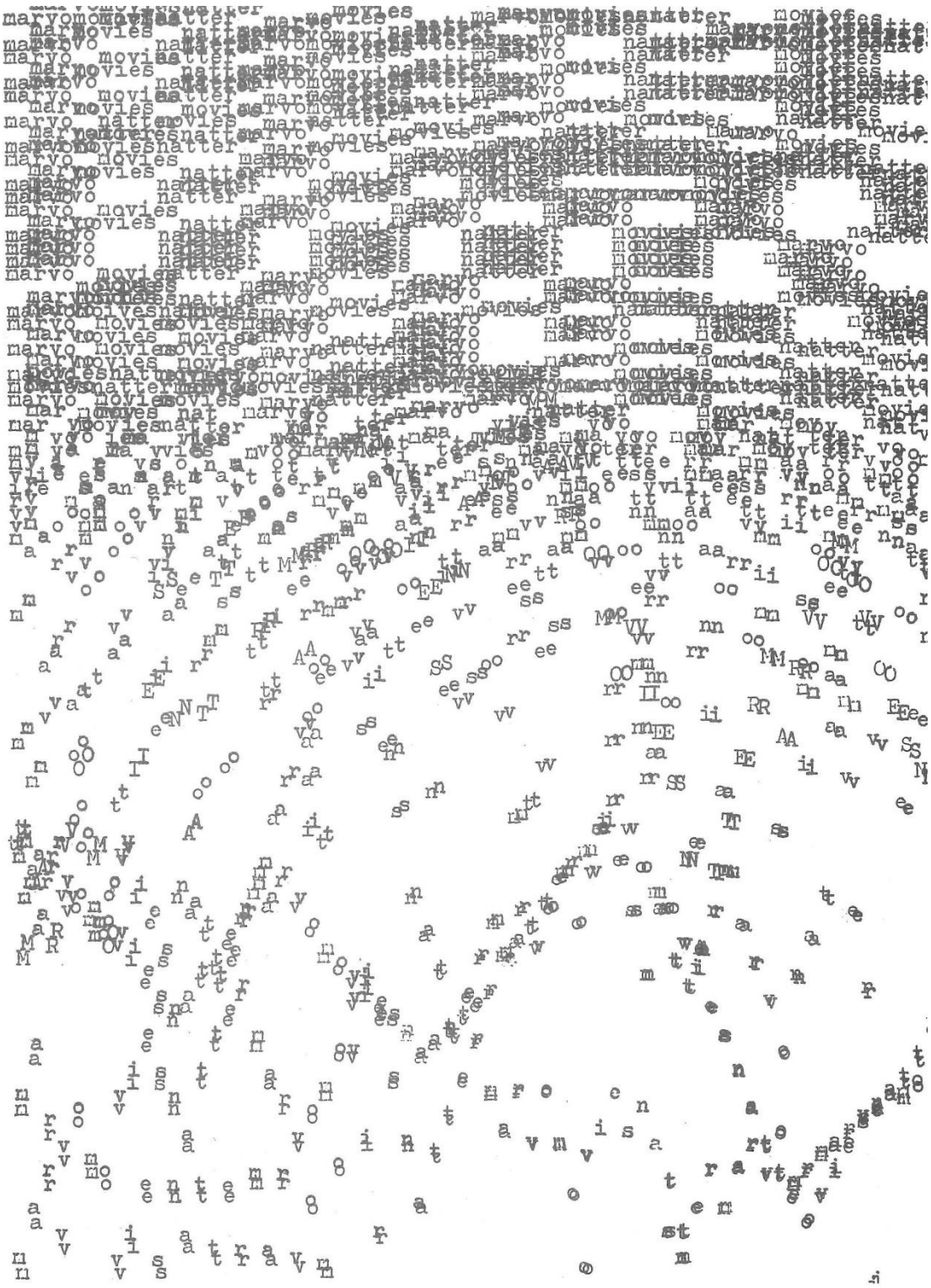


Fig. 6. “Marvo Movie Natter” (two versions).



of letters. Performance would largely depend on finding auditory equivalents for abstract visual effects – line curvature, colour density – and upon the pictorial hints just mentioned, although use of phoneme-sounds would also be possible. Cobbing's soundtrack version uses the overlaid whispers of Cobbing, Nuttall and Lockwood to generate an incessant babbling like running water or glossolalia, within which individual phonemes, bereft of semantic meaning, are periodically audible.

Other *Octo* poems employ a similar patterning or painterly application of language, but using a wider range of mark-making techniques. Two versions of "Spontaneous Appealinair Contemprate Apollinaire", composed for the ICA memorial exhibition Come Back Guillaume, All is Forgiven, incorporate freehand typography, decal transfer and collaged text, degraded by overfeeding to produce sections approaching extra-linguistic compositions in colour and texture; legible passages suggest that the source-text was the exhibition catalogue. A sonic version created with Dufrêne, the second "Whisper Piece" (1969), employs sustained vocal drones, and louder fricatives and breathing noises than the first whisper piece. These are presumably interpretations of the lineation, shape, colour and weight of one visual version of the poem, although which one is impossible to say, typifying the occasionally tenuous qualitative link between sonic and visual versions of Cobbing's poems.

*Whisper Piece* (1969), the sixth Writers Forum Folder, is the visual original for "Whissississippi" (1969), the fourth "Whisper Piece", created with Kerstin Lundberg during the second Fylkingen festival.[36] Another version of *Whisper Piece*, *Whissississippi: A Whisper Piece*, published later that year, contained notes detailing how the tape version had developed from the visual poem, so in this case, sonic and visual variants can be linked together more confidently. Cobbing's introduction stipulates that performance of the sequence should use multiple voices – either group performance or tape overdub – and suggests various specific techniques:

> this is a piece for five performers perhaps or a piece in five movements or a piece for five performers in five movements or in one continuous movement or for fewer than five performers maybe two but not one unless his or her voice added to itself once or twice or five times on magnetic band this is a WHISPER PIECE which means that whispering is an element in it but not necessarily the only element let the performers make an appropriate sound for each symbol on the card horizontally or perhaps in any direction maybe observing silence for the spaces encountered maybe continuing the sound in a dying whisper until the

> next symbol or a rising whisper or not a whisper performers may exchange cards at end of movement or have five cards and use them in any order or a predetermined order movements shall end after a certain predetermined time or arbitrarily or at a signal from one or other of the performers or when the first person exchanges his or her card clusters of symbols may be observed as clusters of sounds single symbols may be sounded separately or lengthened to join the next sounded symbol….

Despite the encompassing qualifications, these postulations actually ironically indicate an unusual degree of authorial direction regarding performance method.

The collection's five constituent poems (see fig. 7) are similar to the "Marvo Movie Natter" visual versions: pattern pieces made with typewriter stencils, suggesting various kinds of organic growth and movement, including concentric ripples and stalactite-like vertical agglomerations.[37] Again, all are formed from the title words –

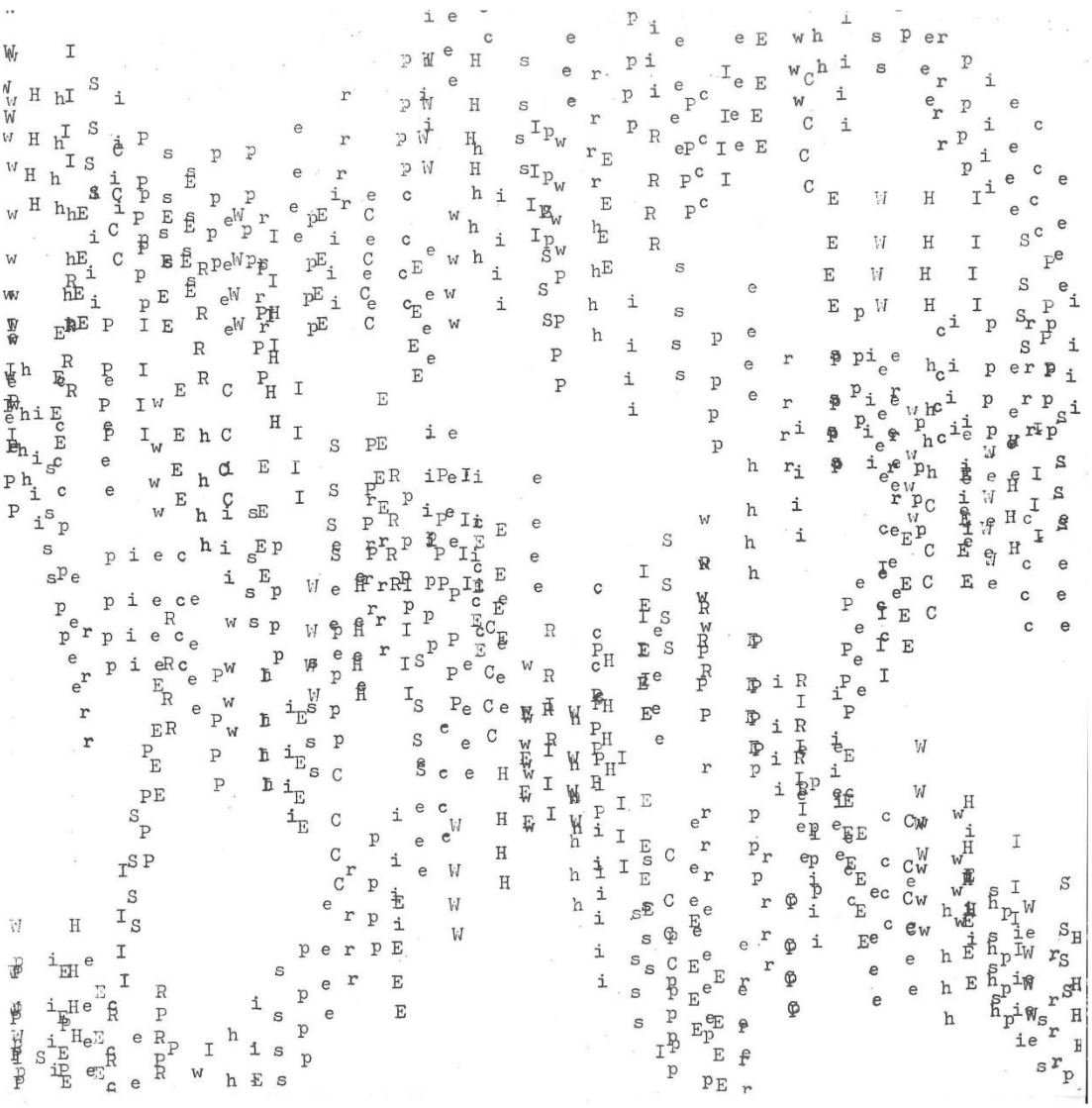


Fig. 7. From *Whisper Piece*.

"Whississippi" and "Whisper Piece" – a lack of semantic-phonetic variety which, along with periodic illegibility, focuses attention on visual effects, inviting a performance transferring those effects into sound: the far sparser overall coverage of letter-forms than in "Marvo", for example, might be translatable as a gentler "whisper" effect. However, various words and sounds suggested by the spatially dispersed letters – "whip", "sip", "he", "her", "rip", "ship", "cries", "prise" – might also be worked in.

If these collections represent the exponential abstraction of visual effects for performance, *Why Shiva Has Ten Arms* (August, 1969), the seventh Writers Forum Folder, reveals an increasingly wide-eyed sense of the critical extrapolations of this. The title, taken from Alan Watts's *The Joyous Cosmology* (1962), alludes to the destructive and transformative capacities of the Hindu god Shiva, reflecting a new sense of the deific, synaesthetic, even sentient capacities of this formally open-ended poetry, inflected by a broad interest in Eastern religions. The introduction states that "many of the poems exist in more than ten versions" because "closely examined, shape becomes colour, which becomes vibration,/ which becomes sound, which becomes smell, which becomes taste,/ and then touch, and then again shape … the joyous cosmology….these visual poems move to sound, dance to light, vibrate to touch/ are innumerably many things at once". If this statement seems the consummation of an intermedial poetics, the poems themselves combine the patterned or painted language of *So* or *Octo* with a new range of compositional methods, including the covert use of a narrative line. These effects reveal the extent to which intermedial form was an impression generated by the close entwining of text and visuals, or language and sound. Two typewriter-patterned versions of "A Voluble Cascade of Rippling Water Emancipates the Light" typify this. Their title comes from a poem written in August 1959:

> Darlings of a wild sensation dare not
> Live within their masks;
> An inner urgency, an erupting valour,
> A voluble cascade of rippling water
> Emancipates the light….("Cascade")

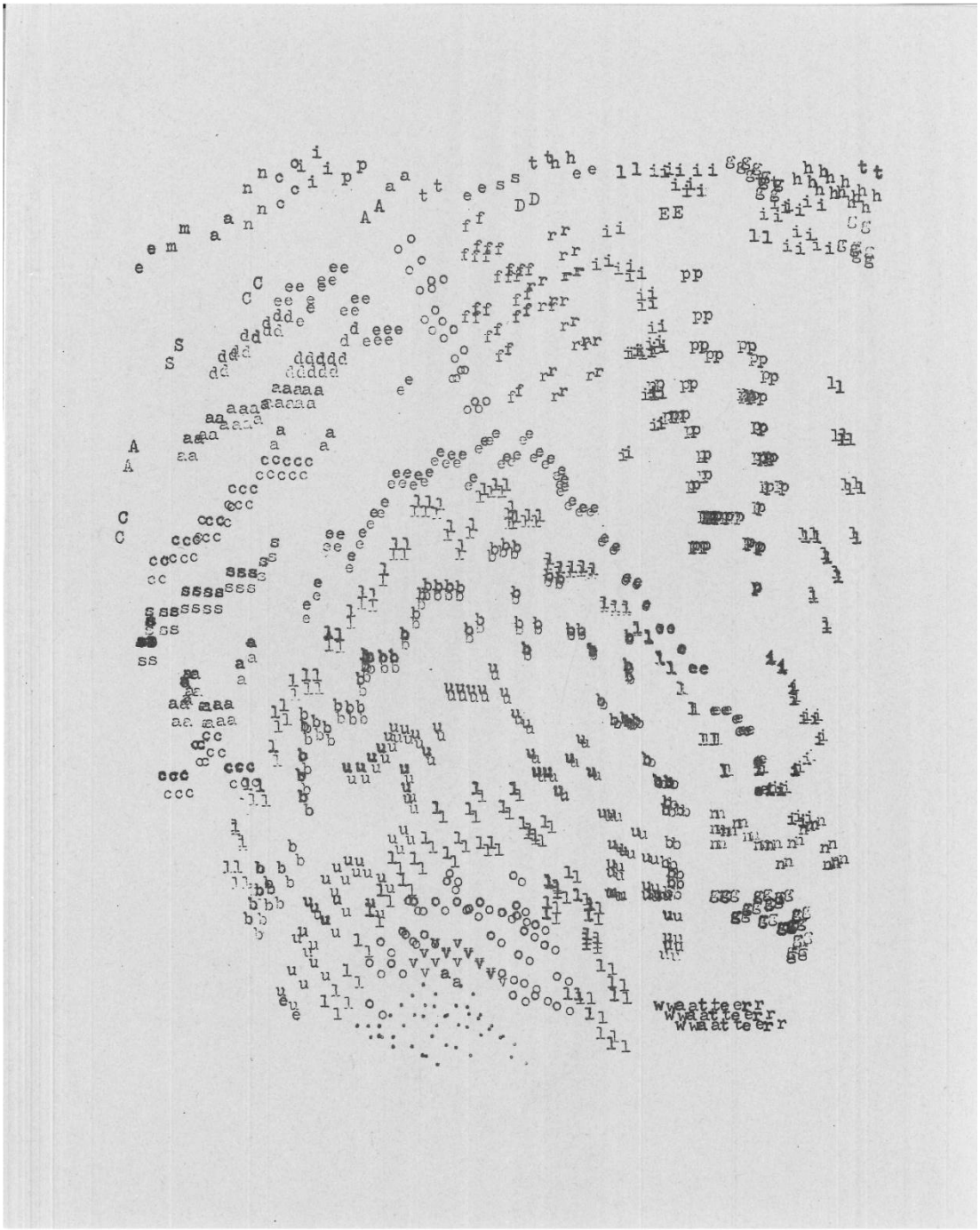



Fig. 8. “A Voluble Cascade … ” (one of two versions).

The first (fig. 8) contains the title phrase typed in subtly concentric rings, rendering, along with the title, a visual suggestion of rippling water. However, the imprints of each letter are clustered tightly enough to retain the phrase's legibility, guiding the eye across the page in an arc. Exclusive use of the title phrase again attenuates the expressive remit, but the visual form is thus enhanced by, and enhances, the narrative line – which also evokes "rippling water" – rather than atomising or attenuating semantic meaning. The cumulative suggestion is of a rain droplet breaking open, its various ephemeral surfaces, represented by scattered graphemes, catching the light at different angles; also, by proxy, the dissipation of sense upon encountering a range of prismatic surfaces, an analogy, perhaps archly sensual, for the fracturing of rational perception's "mask" through poetic experience, as implied in that 1959 poem. Apparently no recordings of this poem exist, but the visual form facilitates all the modes of performance identified above: response to abstract and pictorial visuals, and to phonetic symbols in this case forming a coherent sentence. The resultant symbiosis of language and sound in the sonic poem might render the same impression of intermediality as the visual form achieves.

*Kwatz* (1970), another folder of loose poems, published by Arc, introduces several new types of visual concrete poem, many almost exclusively visual in effect. The range of visual effects for transference into sound in this collection as compared to *So* suggests the significance of the intervening period to Cobbing's poetic development. It also arguably typifies the evolution, or regression, of Cobbing's visual concrete poetry into a form of abstract art. The introduction defines "Kwatz" – "in Chinese, He (pronounced Hay)" – as "a meaningless word, like Vajrarāja's sacred sword cutting the chain of thought", confirming a new inflection of Buddhist thought. It also distinguishes four types of visual concrete poem, the collection containing three of each: "1 typewriter poems where the word becomes image & the letters spin/ 2 fugitive or ghost poems where words recede & ghosts of image focus/ 3 graphic poems drawing with letters & thrust and tension stir &/ 4 photo-montage poems where the word is going going gone". Although Cobbing adds that "the distinction is artificial & unnecessary", those identifiable as "fugitive or ghost poems" and "photo-montage" poems represent new aspects to his visual remit, and exemplify that arguable shift into visual art outlined above.

"Fugitive Poems" use extensive duplicator reproduction to suggest acute visual degradation. One, a version of an earlier "Fugitive Poem" from *Etcetera* (1970), features

a stanza-like shape of highly degraded text overprinted backwards, a line struck through it as if to cross it out. Stems and bowls of letters can be picked out, but the overall effect is of text glimpsed through myopic eyes, that diagonal stroke further suggesting the eradication of language. The *Kwatz* version shows the further visual noise of repeated reproduction, the shadows of accreted duplicator ink at the page's edges a reminder that Cobbing's mediums of composition and reproduction were often identical. A second "Fugitive Poem" (fig. 9) is black except for several white scorch lines, most prominent across the upper centre of the page, perhaps created by pressing ribbons of paper or fabric against a bare duplicator barrel. Against these white sections lines of text can be made out, reading "tchuubaba/ tchuubaba/ tchuwaababa/ tchuwaababa …" These poems must be considered performance cues, although their appeal in this sense is arguably limited. Beyond a faint suggestion of the shapes of the written page, and some minor linguistic cues, they would not hold a performer in engaging tension between image and text, nor a listener, therefore, in tension between speech and sound. Pictographic and abstract visual suggestions are similarly limited. Cobbing's three "Photo-Montage Poems", seemingly composed by exposing photographic negatives on top of each other, retain an even slimmer connection to language, dispensing with the fugitive poems' allusive production method. Their backgrounds are images of armchairs or sofas, one fronted by a translucent group of legs in suit trousers, another by a bespectacled face, probably Cobbing's. These are, of course, pictographic hints, and there are a slightly wider range of colours, textures and weights in use than in the fugitive poems, but these effects seem diminished as performance cues by the absence of language or pseudo-language.

These visual concrete poems arguably represent an ascetic endpoint of Cobbing's abstract visual poesis. Though striking simply considered as visual artworks, the thread holding image in tension with language is severed: by Cobbing's definition this does not stop them being poems, but the crucial suggestion of an intermedial poetry rendered by that image-language tension is forfeited, as is, by the same severance, the more materialistic impression of non-definitive signs identified by some of Cobbing's critics. This work correlates with performance work developed around the same time which passes over into the realms of experimental music. In both cases, exciting work is created, but its presentation as poetry seems to diminish rather than enhance its interest.


Fig. 9 “Fugitive Poem”.

By forfeiting language, this work also prevents inference of the specific instance of language being critiqued or scrutinised, suggesting a broad assault upon semantics less engaging in its vagueness than, for example, the *Eyearun* typestracts.

The Semantic Element

*Etcetera* and *Kris Kringle's Kesmes Korals* (1970) were published by the Cardiff-based Vertigo press, the latter in conjunction with Writers Forum. Both indicate the residual presence of language in Cobbing's early-1970s work, a significant factor given the concerns just raised. This use of language other than as material to be demolished has precedents: Cobbing's 1950s poetry shows his grounding in various conventional poetic modes; even collections such as *Kurrirrurriri* explored techniques arising from concrete linguistic reduction other than a poetry of visual-sonic effect. These "Four Three-Word Poems", for example, toy with language's elementary grammatical relationships and ambiguities:

> precariously balanced
> **on** on **on**
>
> golden possibilities
> **or** or **or**
>
> added (in totos)
> **to** to **to**
>
> absent negatives
> no **no** no

This mode of composition gained momentum during the 1970s: in his fourth collected volume, *The Kollekted Kris Kringle Volume IV* (1979), Cobbing collated language-based poems from across his career, including a non-visual version of "Kris Kringle's Kesmes Korals", and various 1970s "found poems" which supplant the typestracts' visual collaging with "collages" of titles, phrases or definitions. "Confusions", for examples, is a bricolage of entries from H.W. Fowler's *Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1926):

> i
> SAC is a medical & biological word

Not a dressmaker's or tailor's;
See SAC(QUE)
SACHET, see French words
SACK, dismiss(al)
SAC(QUE) For the garment, SACK
is the right form. The other
spellings are pseudo-French,
wrong in different degrees:
there is no French word SACQUE;
but it is not, as the English
SACK is or has been,
the name for a particular garment….

"I Don't Seem to Be Able to Make Friends" seems to be composed from snippets of agony aunt columns:

I don't seem to be able to make friends.
My parents are driving me up the wall.
I'd like to get to know myself better.
I often wonder why I am here – it all seems so pointless.
I'm not interested in anything any more. I can't
concentrate for more than five minutes….

This movement back across the semantic plane in Cobbing's early-1970s work changed the nature of his contemporaneous visual and sonic compositions through interaction with them. In *Kris Kringle's Kesmes Korals,* for example, rather than visual effects subsuming language, the two enhance one another, creating a multimedia poetry which generates the impression of intermediality through the interspersal of text and image. The semantic poems in *Etcetera* have a different value, serving almost as sets of instructions for engagement with that sonic and visual work, emphasising the impression they convey of the non-definitiveness of sign systems. These poems undercut the inference that Cobbing saw a poesis of abstract sonic and visual forms as capable of some immedate, self-sufficient form of expression, making his post-1960s work more amenable to materialist readings like Sheppard's.

*Kris Kringle's Kesmes Korals: Or 12 Days of Xmas* is a tall, thin booklet containing, on each double-page, part of a long text-based poem and a visual duplicator construction. Cobbing recounted its composition in *The Kollekted Kris Kringle*:

> Towards the end of 1969, I was approached by Will Parfitt of Vertigo Publications to write a poem on each of 'The Twelve Days of Christmas' …. Later, Will became dissatisfied with the title and asked for alternatives. I submitted several. He didn't like any of them. I submitted more. Still nothing to his liking. Eventually I came up with 245 titles. The poems were never written….On Christmas Day 1970, he and I published the list of titles, plus visual versions.…([58])

This collation of existing text to create a poem exemplifies Cobbing 1970s semantic collaging techniques, although these materials were composed by him and, realistically, probably with poetic use in mind after a certain point. The text runs through a gamut of Christian and pre-Christian winter festivals, deities and emblems, the atavistic drive of Cobbing's earlier poems evident in its attempt to equalise spiritual terminologies:

> Wolcum Yule
> or
> Holly ivy and bay
> or
> Strenae étrennes
> or
> Modranacht
> or
> Five goldspinks
> or
> Treffen drupan
> or
> Oh man amen….([8])[38]

This passage skirts through Celtic carols ("Wolcum Yule"), the Roman custom of New Year's Day gift giving ("Strenae étrennes"), an Anglo-Saxon yuletide ceremony ("Modranacht"), a line from an archaic version of "The Twelve Days of Christmas" ("Five Goldspinks") and, probably, Grimm's definition of troubadour poetry from *Teutonic Mythology* (1835): "Romance poetry of the Mid. Ages derived the name of its craft from the Prov. Trobar, It. trovare, Fr. trouver, to find, invent"; a footnote adds: "as there is no latin root, we may suggest our own treffen, ON. drepa [drub], lit. to strike, hit, but also (in antreffen) to hit upon, find. The Gothic may have been drupan" (900). The repeated linkage "or" renders the poem one long sentence, leading the reader on at a breathless pace through scattered allusions; Kerouac's prose seems an influence. The piece seems compelled by a desire to return Man's rituals to "a State of Nature":

Man as he is
or
Man in his Bloodvessels
or
Man in his Bones
or
Man seen Within….([11])

But compared to Cobbing's contemporaneous visual and sonic work, these semantic references to an unmediated human essence retain a certain ironic detachment, partly through the repeated "ors", which render each assertion conditional rather than indicative; partly through the impression of shuffling and interrogating pre-existing text.

The poem's visual sections again use overprinted duplicator stencils, the alternately jutting right-hand margin imprinted in regular and back-to-front positions to mimic branches or limbs spreading out on either side of a central trunk of black letter-forms. The most obvious illustrative hint is of a christmas tree, but this depends on semantic suggestion to come across. Although this cumulative suggestion is playful, it highlights the symbiosis of language and image in Cobbing's most engaging visual concrete work, rendering an impression of intermedial expression. Even at a basic level, the textual and visual elements highlight and punctuate each other, preventing monotony of expression by contrast with another medium.

*Etcetera* contains an even sweep of visually, sonically and semantically oriented poems, the latter mainly short, aphoristic verses designed to configure engagement with the visual and sonic work. Three of these – "Maroney", an untitled intermediary poem, and "Xperiment" – comprise a mini-sequence. "Maroney" is composed entirely from the annotation to an illustration in M.J. Moroney's article "On the Average and Scatter", from James R. Newman's 1956 textbook *World of Mathematics,* concerning "skew" distribution of number groups (1,499). In skew cases, calculations of "average" through the concepts of mean (statistical average) median (the middle number on a line of ascending value) and mode (the most frequently occurring number) produce different results:

Mean median and mode
In moderately skew cases;
For moderately skew distributions

We have the simple approximate relation:
Mean - Mode = 3(Mean – Median);
For a perfectly symmetrical distribution
They all coincide.

The idea of different calculation methods producing different versions of the same concept serves as an allegory for the contingency of truth judgements to the language of their utterance: the "skewness" of words. The following, untitled poem expands on this idea, using permutation to imply the impossibility of definitude, and the mutual reliance of chance, certainty and impossibility:

absolute
certainty
absolute
chance
absolute
impossibility

absolute
chance
chance
certainty
certain
impossibility….

The last poem, "XPeriment", draws out the consequences for poetic composition:

Every poem is an experiment –
The tightrope –
Sometimes it comes off;
Sometimes you come off.

Asserting the experimental, non-definitive nature of all poetic composition partly contextualises Cobbing's rejection of what he saw as the specious definitude of words. It also implies a method for converting visuals into sound during performance: by realising the chance, contingent nature of all meaning systems, the performer should feel free to engage with a visual poem through openly subjective assignations of value. But perhaps most primarily, it simply serves as an ironic acknowledgement of the possibility of creative failure in a poetic method predicated on constant experiment.

This acknowledgement undercuts the idea that Cobbing saw his poetry of abstract visual or sonic forms as capable of generating some mysterious, unmediated form of sensory experience. In using language to make that point, moreover, it undercuts the related supposition that Cobbing's concrete poetry was solely concerned with erasing and transcending semantics. It thus exemplifies the early-1970s tempering of 1960s transcendentalism with a sceptical streak – conveying an impression of the mediatory nature of all expressive gesture – which ultimately brought Cobbing's work back to a position allowing continued developments within an altered idiom of concrete poetry. Indeed, although one outcome of this project has undoubtedly been to reconfirm the exceptional contribution of Finlay's metamorphosing imagination to the English-Scottish reception of concrete poetry, it was not only through his models of Arcadian order, but also through Cobbing's wild improvisatory rites, that its influence in those countries continued to be felt: across the remainder of the century and into the next.

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[1] Indeed, the importance of what I call "sonic concrete poetry" to Cobbing's oeuvre suggests that it might rather be considered "sound poetry", in the French tradition. However, as Cobbing's own descriptions of his work as "concrete" suggests, it developed partly in response to classical style as he perceived it, and is thus definable as concrete by the terms outlined in my second chapter. Cobbing also frequently called his work "sound poetry", of course, and it can also be placed in that tradition, besides many others. Ultimately, the validity of these terms is not mutually exclusive.

[2] I frequently refer to these effects as "visual and sonic effects" or similar, taking that phrase to exclude language, which of course employs both. The term "abstract" is used broadly throughout this chapter, to define any expressive gesture whose significatory value is wilfully ambiguous: either open to multiple interpretations, or involving sparse contrasts of colour, texture, timbre, etcetera.

[3] References to archived material or papers refer to Cobbing's BL collection unless stated. From September 1943 to December 1947, Cobbing taught art at the Gables High School, Swindon, initially as a conscientious objector. In January 1948 he joined Bognor Teacher Training College, starting work in March 1949 at Barnfield Secondary School, Barnet, where he remained until 1963. In April 1950 he began an evening lecturing job at Hendon Technical College.

[4] Lack of referencing in this document makes it unclear whether quotation marks indicate common turns of phrase, citations of specific authors, or both. Cobbing may also not have written this statement, but his involvement with the course suggests sufficient investment in it to warrant quoting.

[5] Archived notebooks and cuttings reveal that the art club held its first exhibition in spring 1952, in June of that year it becoming a founding member-group of Hendon Arts Together (HAT), an umbrella organisation also cofounded by Cobbing, along with

Hendon Poetry Society and Hendon Music Group. Before becoming Group H, which was operative into the 1960s, the group was rechristened Hendon Art Group in October 1954, and, in April 1955, Hendon Group of Painters and Sculptors.

[6] These works are assessed and collated in Chris Beckett's excellent survey "Bob Cobbing, Visual Art Works (1942-73): A Preliminary Survey" (2012).

[7] These names do not correspond to those of any works in the mid-to-late-1950s exhibitions whose catalogues are stored with Cobbing's papers: they were perhaps renamed for the 1990 collection.

[8] Beckett's "Bob Cobbing, Visual Art Works" contains an image of four monoprints in red ink from 1955 entitled *Crabtree* which employ the same shape; the prints reproduced in 1990 were presumably part of the same series, so were probably originally red, but are not actually among the four (28).

[9] See "First Duplicator-Print, 1942".

[10] See the unattributed *Evening Press* article "They Are the Writers' Forum Now" (September 4, 1958). Writers' Circle was briefly renamed Writers' Group in 1957, according to headings in Cobbing's notebooks. In interviews Cobbing referred to Writers' Forum beginning in 1952, suggesting that he considered the formation of Writers' Circle the origin.

[11] Chris Beckett notes the similarities between the voice prompts in "The Congo" and in *Sound Poems* ("From the Bombast of Vachal Lindsay to the Compass of Noise: The Papers of Bob Cobbing at the British Library" 9)

[12] That summer Cobbing cofounded the Finchley Society of Arts, an umbrella group like HAT, with less successful results, resigning in November 1962. Cobbing's attempts to set up radically minded arts organisations in communities dominated by "traditionalists" foretoken his involvement in the mid-1970s takeover of the Poetry Society documented in Peter Barry's *Poetry Wars*.

[13] Richter actually credits Hans Arp with discovering chance technique, in around 1916, after discarding a torn up drawing (51). However, "[i]t was left to Tzara to follow the principle of chance to its logical or illogical conclusion in literature….He cut newspaper articles up into tiny pieces, none of them longer than a word, put the words in a bag, shook them well, and allowed them to flutter on to a table. The arrangement, or lack of it, constituted a 'poem'…"(54).

[14] *And,* an extremely occasional periodical founded by Writers' Circle in 1953, later became associated with the UK reception of concrete; it is now edited by Lawrence Upton.

[15] This lineation is reproduced from Cobbing's notebook, not from *Cygnet Ring,* in which the poem was published.

[16] The Albert Hall reading is discussed in *Bomb Culture*, in Barry Miles's *London Calling* (2010; chapter 12) and Jonathon Green's *Days in the Life* (1988). Houédard is a prominent audience member in Whitehead's film.

[17] Trocchi's manifesto first appeared in *New Saltire* in Edinburgh, but has more to do with the reception of concrete poetry in Finchley than Fettes Row. Finlay was, however, along with Morgan, one of the few Scottish recipients of Trocchi's *Sigma Portfolio*, an expanding library of critical documents circulated throughout the 1960s to a paying list; (see Morgan's letter to Alec Finlay in Finlay and Birrell's *Justified Sinners* [letter 3]). Despite the sweep of its ambition, the manifesto bore a specific aim: to establish an international network of non-authoritarian educational communities, "a combination of Black Mountain College, Newbattle Abbey, and an Israeli kibbutz" according to Morgan

("Alexander Trocchi: A Survey" 271). In 1964 Trocchi, Cobbing, Nuttall, Laing and others requisitioned Braziers Park, a country manor near London, for a prototypical gathering of such a community; Nuttall describes the abortive results (*Bomb Culture* 211-17). In 1968, Cobbing was also teaching a sound poetry course at the "Anti-University of London" in Shoreditch, founded on the ideals of Trocchi's manifesto.

[18] Lee Harwood's introduction to *Bob Cobbing and Writers Forum* lucidly evokes this aspect of Cobbing's poetics.

[19] Writing to Morgan (July 1964) regarding the ICA event, Houédard recalled: "henri chopin & brion gysin/(who is nice really)/ played the OU (ex cinquieme-saison) disk:/heidsieck-chopin-gysin". Heidsieck's presence is not mentioned. What Cobbing remembered as a Heidseick performance was probably a recording from one of Chopin's *OU* LPs; recalling what seems to be the same event to Mottram, Cobbing stated: "[Chopin] played a Heidsieck tape I was highly fascinated by" (*Composition and Performance* [7]).

[20] Beckett's "Molloy" and Queneau's *Exercises in Style* were also performed.

[21] This quote is the source of the name of Cobbing's performance group Birdyak.

[22] The poem appears in *Cygnet Ring* as "Burroughs Welcome". Grammar and spelling are reproduced from that version.

[23] *Sound Poems* is treated as a single poem.

[24] I call this work "sound" rather than "sonic" poetry to avoid confusion with the term "sonic concrete poetry". The term "Ultralettrist" acknowledges its roots in Isou's Lettrism.

[25] This recording features on the 2009 CD *The Spoken Word: Bob Cobbing*

[26] Cobbing's 1960s-70s works were produced on a Gestetner Mimeograph, using stencils of text wrapped around a cylindrical drum which released ink through a permeable surface to reproduce the text on a sheet passed underneath. Text or images could be punched into stencils using an un-banded typewriter or, in Cobbing's case, an electronic scanner. Like spirit duplicators, mimeographs were a common means of non-professional text reproduction before the advent of photocopiers.

[27] The collection's title references Tylor's chapters on "Emotional and Imitative Language" in global vocabularies: "[t]ake Australian cases: *walle*, 'to *wail;*' *bung-bung-ween*, 'thunder;' *wirriti*, 'to blow, as wind;' *wirrirriti*, 'to storm, rage, as in fight;' *wirri, bwirri*, 'the native throwing stick,' seemingly so called from its *whir* through the air; *kurarriti*, 'to hum, buzz;' *kurrirrurriri*, 'round about, unintelligible,'…." (192). Cobbing's "One Two Plenty" uses various simple number systems, some binary or ternary, quoted by Tylor as examples of those used by "the lowest living men, the savages of the South American forests and the deserts of Australia" (220): "[n]ot only have travellers failed to get names … for numbers above 2, 3, or 4, but the opinion that these are the real limits of their numeral series is strengthened by the use of their highest known number as an indefinite term for a great many….In a Puri vocabulary the numbers are … 1.*omi;* 2. *curiri;* 3. *prica*, 'many' … " (ibid.). Cobbing runs through various numerical systems subsequently glossed by Tylor, including Brazilian, Tasmanian and Australian languages:

> one two plenty
> omi curiri prica
> parmery calabawa cardia
> ganar burla burla ganar burla burla korumba
> mal bularr guliba

> bularr bularr bula guliba guliba guliba
> couai macouai
> ouai ouai ouai ouai
> ouai ouai ouai
> oney dooe tray
> quaterer chinker say
> say oney say dooey say tray….

The last three lines use a bastardised Franco-Italian senary system used, according to Tylor, by "the English street-folk … as a means of secret communication", adopted "from the organ-grinders and image-sellers, or by other ways through which Italian or Lingua-Franca is brought into the low neighbourhoods of London" (243). Cobbing's use of these languages seems designed to undercut Tylor's ethno-centric assumptions of "savagery" by making them "poetic", although he arguably reaffirms such assumptions by valorising that "savagery" as a concomitant of expressive purity.

[28] Various archived newspaper cuttings cite Jandl's 1965 reading as the point when concrete poetry took hold in the UK, partly because of its potential as a sound-based performance medium. In the *Times Education Supplement* in 1968, Meirion Bowen remarked that "concrete poetry, the area between music and poetry … did not take a hold in this country until quite recently. It was, infact, the success of Ernst Jandl's reading … that provoked interest in the art of 'pure sound' ".

[29] It appeared alongside Chopin's "Open Letter to Aphonic Musicians", in anticipation of a joint performance probably organised by Zurbrugg, then studying at UEA.

[30] See "They Couldn't Save This Sole" (*Hampstead News* September 16, 1963):

> A wellington boot died last week—a white wellington boot that resisted the skill of a surgeon in the "operating theatre" at the New End Art Gallery, Hampstead. Remember the "Happening" at the Edinburgh Festival on Saturday, during which a model stripped? Well, Operation Wellington Boot was also a "Happening"—staged by members of Arts Together….

The event was probably the climax to the thirtieth Group H exhibition. For accounts of the Edinburgh happening see Alec Finlay and Birrell's *Justified Sinners*.

[31] See Michael Nyman's *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (1974) on the growth of the happening from aleatoric performance. Nyman also discusses Cage's involvement in the "so-called Happening at Black Mountain College, the first post-war mixed-media event", held in 1952, the year of the first performances of *4'33"* (72).

[32] Tom Phillips's opera score *Irma* (1969) is similar to Cobbing's late-1960s work in that it grew from visual literature – ninety excerpts from Phillips's treated Victorian novel *A Humument*, variously selected as libretto and indications of set design, mise en scène and sound-effects – but it is semantic rather than graphic in basis.

[33] Metzger had been staging auto-destructive art events since the early 1960s, including his *Acid Action Painting* on London's South Bank (1961): painting on nylon canvases with hydrochloric acid which dissolved them after fifteen seconds. DIAS was nominally organised by a large committee, consisting of Mario Amaya, Roy Ascott, Enrico Baj, Cobbing, Ivor Davies, Jim Haynes, Houédard, Metzger, Barry Miles, Frank Popper, Sharkey and Wolf Vostell (Metzger "Preliminary Report"). But Sharkey states that in reality he and Metzger undertook most of the organisational work (personal interview).

[34] Events were also held in Scotland. On September 1 Sharkey and Ivor Davies gave a press conference at the Demarco Gallery, Edinburgh, followed by Davies's *Explosive Art Demonstration* at the Drill Hall (Metzger "Preliminary Report"). On October 3 Sharkey wrote to Morgan recalling these and other events, including a reading at the Traverse Theatre and a lecture at the Fringe Club. Morgan's reply reveals he did not attend these events, although his Glasgow archive does contain DIAS-related documents, including the "Preliminary Report" and "Excerpts from Selected Papers" quoted here, suggesting an interest distinguished, unlike Cobbing's, from his interest in concrete poetry. Finlay would have been absent: putting aside his agoraphobia, he distrusted auto-destructive philosophy, inferring a vicarious interest in the destructive forces it critiqued. Writing to Houédard on November 8, 1965 suspecting auto-destructive influences upon a recent Openings publication, Finlay called the work "hideous", adding "you would all praise Auschwitz if it was presented to you as 'a happening', and the hydrogen bomb if it was presented as … auto-destructive art".

[35] Some of these variations appeared in *Lame, Limping, Mangled Marred and Mutilated*. The DIAS prints were published posthumously in *Destruction in Art* (2004), and two of the six variations on *Typestract 1* in *Octo* (1969).

[36] The third, "Voitex" (1969), features on *The Spoken Word*.

[37] *Whisper Piece* is treated as a single poem.

[38] Page references are to the *Kollekted Kris Kringle* version.

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